

# The Epistle of James

LESSON  
ONE

## INTRODUCTION TO JAMES



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Background .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Authorship	1
1. Traditional Outlook	2
2. Personal History	4
B. Original Audience	5
C. Occasion	6
1. Location	6
2. Date	6
3. Purpose	8
<b>III. Structure &amp; Content .....</b>	<b>9</b>
A. Greeting	12
B. Wisdom and Joy	12
C. Wisdom and Obedience	14
1. Action	14
2. Favoritism	15
3. Faith	16
D. Wisdom and Peace	17
1. Tongue	17
2. Two Kinds of Wisdom	18
3. Inward Conflict	19
E. Wisdom and the Future	19
1. Making Plans	19
2. Hoarding Wealth	20
3. Waiting Patiently	20
F. Wisdom and Prayer	21
G. Concluding Exhortations	21
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>22</b>

# The Epistle of James

## Lesson One

### Introduction to James

#### INTRODUCTION

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Imagine, for a moment, growing up with a close sibling or friend. You play together, learn together and reach adulthood together. For most of your life, this person has been by your side and then one day, your friend or sibling claims to be God's "Chosen One." Well, for James, the brother of Jesus, this wasn't just an imaginary scenario. In his younger years, he doubted that Jesus was the Savior. But later in his life, he not only became a follower of Jesus; he became the leader of the church at Jerusalem and wrote the New Testament book that bears his name.

This is the first lesson in our series on *The Epistle of James*, and we've entitled it "Introduction to James." In this lesson, we'll touch on a number of introductory issues that will enable us to pursue a faithful interpretation of this portion of the New Testament.

We'll approach our "Introduction to James" in two ways. First, we'll explore the background of the book. And second, we'll examine its structure and content. Let's begin with the background of the book of James.

#### BACKGROUND

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With any biblical book, it's important to understand the context surrounding its writing as much as possible. The various books of the Bible were written in real historical settings by people with particular motivations and concerns. So, studying these kinds of background issues can help us understand the books themselves. When we consider the settings and motivations associated with the book of James, we're better equipped to understand what the epistle meant when it was first written. And we can apply James' words more effectively to our lives today.

To understand the background of James, we'll consider first the authorship of the book. Then we'll look at the original audience. And finally, we'll examine the occasion on which the letter of James was written. Let's begin with the authorship of the epistle of James.

#### AUTHORSHIP

Although we know that the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, many books in the Bible, like James, also identify their human authors. And the more we know about

biblical authors, then the better prepared we are to understand and interpret what they wrote. So, for this reason, we must learn all we can about who wrote the epistle of James.

To investigate the authorship of James, we'll consider two subjects. First, we'll explore the traditional outlook that James, the younger brother of Jesus, wrote the epistle. Second, we'll explore the author's personal history. Let's start by looking at the traditional outlook on these matters.

## Traditional Outlook

The letter opens, in James 1:1, with this simple statement:

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings (James 1:1).**

As we see here, the letter clearly identifies a man named "James" as the author. But this greeting doesn't settle precisely who this man was. Five different men in the New Testament, including two of Jesus' twelve disciples, were named James. But only two of these five men would have had enough authority in the early church to write a letter like this.

The first of these two was James, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John. But according to Acts 12:2, this James was martyred under Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 44. As we'll see later, there are good reasons for believing that the book of James was written after Herod's death. So, it's highly unlikely that James, the son of Zebedee, was the author. The second James was the younger brother of Jesus. He was also the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. This James was, by far, the more prominent of the two and the one most theologians have attributed the epistle to through the centuries.

There is a great deal of support for the traditional outlook that Jesus' brother James wrote this epistle. But there are also a few objections. Let's begin with the support for this view.

**Support.** In the first place, in 1:1, the writer didn't give any credentials beyond saying that he was "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." He simply assumed that his name alone would be recognized and would carry sufficient authority. And based on this authority, his letter contains one strong command after another. This opening greeting, then, makes a strong case for Jesus' brother James because of his status in the early church in Jerusalem.

**Well, in the days of the apostolic church, the whole question of authority was very significant. Who has the authority to teach and lead this new community of followers of Jesus Christ? There were various writings that were circulating, various claims to have authority, and one of the criteria that emerged that was very significant was that of being an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus, those who were eyewitnesses of his ministry, who spent the time with**

**the Lord himself were considered to have a righteous claim to the authority to teach in the early church. Now, James, the brother of Jesus, of course, was an eyewitness to his ministry, but more than that, had been an eyewitness really to the whole of his life, and that did play a significant role in the weight that the teaching of James and the weight that James' letter was given in the early church.**

— Rev. Dr. Michael Walker

In the second place, the testimony of the early church confirms this outlook on the authorship of the book. *The First Epistle of Clement*, written around A.D. 96, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written around A.D. 140, both either refer to or quote from James' epistle. And Origen, who died in A.D. 254, quoted the book of James several times in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Origen's use of James is particularly significant because in Book 4, Chapter 8, Origen identified the author of James as "the brother of the Lord." We also know that the church in the East, and later the church in the West, accepted this letter as the work of Jesus' brother.

Now, despite this strong support for the traditional outlook that Jesus' brother James was the author, there have been some objections.

**Objections.** Critical interpreters have suggested at least two alternatives. Some interpreters have looked for an unknown James in the early church. They say that the person who wrote the letter was indeed named James, but he wasn't the son of Zebedee or the brother of Jesus. He remains obscure because he wasn't mentioned in any other writings of the infant church. However, this theory is unlikely. As we've already noted, the simplicity of the author's identification at the beginning of the letter indicates that he was well known. It's highly doubtful that there would have been nothing else written about him.

A second theory offered by critical interpreters is that of pseudonymity. Pseudonymity refers to the practice of assigning written works to someone other than the actual author. This practice took place among Jews in the first century for a variety of reasons. One prominent reason for pseudonymity was to give weight or authority to a book or letter. In the case of James' epistle, critical interpreters have argued that someone other than James used his name to gain wider acceptance for their letter in the church. Now, according to passages like 2 Thessalonians 2:2, this practice was scorned in the first century church as deceit. But critical scholars still offer at least three arguments for this objection.

First, they say, there is no mention of the author's relation to Jesus. They say it's unthinkable that a brother of Jesus would write to the churches and not reveal this familial bond when he identified himself. But Jude, the author of the epistle of Jude, was also Jesus' brother. And he never mentioned his blood-ties to Jesus in his letter. So, this argument for pseudonymity is weak at best.

Second, some critical scholars assume pseudonymity because the book gives evidence that the author was aware of Hellenistic — or Greek — culture, and James was a Jew from Palestine. It's true that the writer of James had some awareness of Greek culture. For instance, in James 3:6, he used the phrase "the whole course of one's life."

This phrase was commonly used in Greek philosophy and religion. But at the time James' letter was written, many well-educated Jews in Palestine had more than a passing knowledge of Hellenistic philosophy and religion.

In addition, while the Greek of James is more sophisticated than what we find in other portions of the New Testament, it isn't, by any means, the most sophisticated Greek in the New Testament. In fact, the letter is quite similar in style to books such as *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and other Hellenistic Jewish writings of that time.

A third argument for pseudonymity points to inconsistencies with the theological portrait of James in the books of Acts and Galatians. This view suggests that some of the ideas expressed in the epistle of James don't match theological outlooks attributed to James in these other New Testament books. For instance, critical interpreters point to passages like Acts 21:17-25 and Galatians 2:12. They argue that, in these verses, James appears to be a spokesman for a rather conservative Jewish-Christian position on the law. But in James 1:25 and James 2:12, the author seems to take a somewhat lenient view of the law, calling it the "law that gives freedom."

But these differences simply are not as great as critical scholars make them out to be. On closer review, the verses cited in Acts and Galatians don't portray an extreme Jewish-Christian point of view. And James' position on the law in Acts and Galatians is, actually, very consistent with the theology of the letter of James.

As we can see, the arguments against James, the brother of Jesus, being the author of this book are weak at best. The arguments in favor of James' authorship are much more compelling. And because of this, most evangelical scholars rightly affirm that James, the brother of Jesus, was the author of the letter that bears his name.

We've considered the authorship of James by looking at the traditional outlook. Now, let's look more closely at James' personal history.

## Personal History

Matthew 13:55 identifies James as one of Mary's sons and one of Jesus' half-brothers. This family connection may account for the many similarities between James' epistle and Jesus' teachings recorded in the Gospels. But Scripture makes it clear that when James and his other brothers were growing up, they didn't recognize who their oldest sibling really was. As John 7:5 tells us:

**Even [Jesus'] own brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5).**

But, at some point in his life, James came to have saving faith in Jesus as his Lord. In fact, James rose to such prominence in the early church that Paul called him, in Galatians 2:9, one of the "pillars" of the church. In addition, we know that, according to 1 Corinthians 15:7, Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection.

James' position of authority is well documented in the New Testament. For instance, he appears three times in the book of Acts as the leader of the Jerusalem church. And in Acts 15, we see him as the spokesman for the apostolic council. Even non-Christians acknowledged James' importance in the church. One of the most well known

accounts of James' violent death in A.D. 62 comes from the Jewish historian Josephus. Listen to *Antiquities*, Book 20, Chapter 9, section 1, written in A.D. 93, where Josephus described the circumstances surrounding James' death:

**[Ananus] convened the judges of the Sanhedrin, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, the one called Christ, whose name was James, and certain others, and accusing them of having transgressed the law delivered them up to be stoned.**

While growing up, James may not have understood who his older brother really was. But, we can see from Josephus' account, and from Scripture and other historical records, that later in his adult life, James had an unwavering commitment to Jesus as the Christ. As Eusebius wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 2, chapter 23, quoting the early Christian historian Hegesippus:

**[James] became a true witness, both to Jews and Greeks, that Jesus is the Christ.**

Now that we've considered the background of James' epistle by looking at some of the issues surrounding authorship, let's explore the original audience of this letter.

## ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

Theologians often spend a great deal of time and energy trying to learn as much as possible about the author of a particular biblical book. But discovering the identity of the original audience is just as important. If we want to interpret correctly what a biblical writer was saying, it helps us to know who the writer's original readers were and what they were facing at that particular time in history. As we saw earlier, in James 1:1, James identified his readers as:

**The twelve tribes scattered among the nations (James 1:1).**

This seems to be a reference to Jews who lived outside of Israel. And, in 2:1, James addressed his audience as:

**Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (James 2:1).**

Taken together, these verses indicate that James' original audience was made up, primarily, of Jewish Christians who lived outside of Palestine.

On several occasions in his book, James addressed his audience affectionately as "brothers." But how did James, living in Jerusalem, know his audience well enough to speak to them in this way? Well, in Acts 8:1-4 we learn that, in the wave of persecution following Stephen's martyrdom, members of the Jerusalem church were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. It's possible then that James, as the leader of the



Jerusalem church, was writing to these scattered members of “the twelve tribes.” But, even if the epistle wasn’t addressed specifically to these believers, it seems that James’ audience was made up of Jewish Christians in similar circumstances.

The vocabulary James used also supports the idea that his original readers were Jewish followers of Jesus. For example, in 2:2, James chose the word *synagōgē* (συναγωγή) or “synagogue” to describe his audience’s meetings. This was a typical way to refer to Jewish gatherings. And in 5:4 James used the phrase “Lord Almighty,” or *kurios sabaōth* (Κυρίου Σαβαώθ). This phrase comes from a common Old Testament name for the God of Israel, *Yahweh tsabaōt* (יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת). Language of this kind makes much more sense if the recipients have strong Jewish roots.

**Knowing the background of James' audience is extremely important because it helps us set a trajectory as to how we understand the message that he's trying to articulate to his audience... James' audience, as a Jewish community, are recipients of a long tradition of the Torah of Moses, the message of the prophets and the writings... James draws on this rich tradition as he talks to them about the life of faith, the wise life. And they need to understand how they should apply it into their own lives in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

— Dr. Scott Redd

Now, when we say that James was writing to Jewish Christians, we don’t mean that there were no Gentile believers in the churches James addressed. As early as Acts 8 we know of an Ethiopian convert. And, as we learn in Acts 10, there were many Gentile, God-fearing converts to Judaism who attended synagogues. So, it wouldn’t have been surprising to find at least some Gentile believers in these churches as well. Still, according to Romans 9:8, Gentile believers were regarded as “Abraham’s offspring.” And, ideally, they were considered just as much a part of the twelve tribes of Israel as any who were Jews by bloodline.

We’ve looked at the background of James by considering the epistle’s authorship and its original audience. Now, we’re ready to examine the occasion of its writing.

## OCCASION

We’ll explore the occasion of the writing of James in three steps. First, we’ll touch on the location of both the author and audience. Second, we’ll consider the date of composition. Third, we’ll think about the purpose of James’ epistle. Let’s begin by looking at the location of both the author and the audience of this letter.

## Location

The location of the author isn't difficult to discern. Both the New Testament and early church fathers suggest that James lived his life of ministry in Jerusalem. And he remained in Jerusalem until he was martyred in A.D. 62. Because of this, there's no reason to think that he wrote the epistle from any other location.

The location of the original audience is also somewhat straightforward. As we just mentioned, the letter's recipients were most likely Jewish believers who had been scattered throughout Judea and Samaria after the murder of Stephen. Acts 11:19 tells us that these displaced believers traveled as far as Phoenicia, Antioch and Cyprus in search of a safe place to live. We can't be positive that James wrote to believers in these specific locations. Yet, based on James' initial greeting to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations," these areas are strong possibilities for the location of James' original audience.

**We really think that these are truly dispersed tribes. That is, the parishioners of Jerusalem who were scattered into Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch by the persecution after Stephen's martyrdom, that it's quite possible, in fact, I think it likely, that James was writing to these folks as his own parishioners. And the reason I think that is that he, surprisingly, gives us no theology or virtually none overtly; he doesn't talk in terms of the structure of the gospel. There are quite a few things that he doesn't mention, and as a pastor, I'm thinking, well, he probably covered those things earlier in his ministry, and now he's speaking to his well known audience in the way that a pastor would... And so, it has great affect on our sense of James, that we look at this audience scattered, this audience already under his ministry, and see him building in that way.**

— Dr. Michael Kennison

Keeping in mind this first aspect of the occasion of James' epistle — the location of the author and audience — now, let's consider the date of the letter's composition.

## Date

The earliest and latest likely dates for this letter are fairly easy to establish. First, the earliest likely date for the letter's composition is A.D. 44. We know that James wrote his epistle as the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Acts 12:17 indicates that James became a significant leader of the Jerusalem church by the time of Peter's release from prison. According to Acts 12:19-23, Peter was released in the year Herod Agrippa I died in A.D. 44. This makes it most likely that the epistle was not written much before this date.

Second, the latest possible date of composition for the epistle is A.D. 62, the year of James' martyrdom. As we saw earlier, according to Josephus, James died at the hands

of the priest Ananus near this time. This provides a brief window for the letter's composition.

The letter itself doesn't include specific references to historical events that would date it more specifically. But there are at least two reasons to think that the date of composition was earlier, rather than later.

For one, as we mentioned before, in 2:2, James used the word *sunagogē* (συναγωγή), or "synagogue," to describe his audience's meetings.

The use of "synagogue" seems to indicate an early stage in the development of the Christian movement. James may have written before Christians were forced out of the synagogues. Or, at the very least, he wrote at a time when Christians were still calling their gatherings a "synagogue."

In addition, there's no mention in James' epistle of the Jewish-Gentile controversies that received so much attention in the writings of Peter and Paul.

In the early church, as Gentiles came to faith in Christ in large numbers, conflicts arose over whether or not these new believers should be required to conform to Jewish customs. Perhaps James simply chose not to deal with these controversies. But more likely, they hadn't yet become a major factor in the life of the young churches that James addressed.

Having looked at the letter's occasion both in its location and its date, let's examine James' purpose in writing this letter.

## Purpose

One of the most helpful ways to summarize the overarching purpose of James is to look at James 1:2-4. In his opening words, James told his readers:

**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).**

As this passage indicates, James' audience was facing trials of many kinds. But James called them to have pure joy in their trials. Trials, he explained, produce perseverance. And those who persevere will become "mature and complete, not lacking anything." But the real key to James' message comes in the very next verse. In verse 5, James completed his thought with these words:

**If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you (James 1:5).**

We'll discuss these verses in more detail later in the lesson. But for now, this passage gives us a window into the heart of the entire epistle. To experience pure joy in the midst of trials, "ask God" for wisdom, and "it will be given to you." With this in mind, we can summarize the main purpose of James' letter in this way:

**James called his audience to pursue wisdom from God so that they would have joy in their trials.**

It was important for James' audience to hear this message. As we said earlier, James' audience was no longer in Palestine. They were living "scattered among the nations," far from their homes. No doubt, it wasn't easy for them to find joy in their trials. This appears to have led some of them to abandon their loyalty to Christ. Instead, they were pursuing what James called "friendship with the world." Listen to James 4:4 where James used these strong words:

**You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4).**

Clearly, there were some in James' audience who had strayed far from the faith. And James warned them that being friends with the world made them "an enemy of God."

It's no wonder then that James exerted his authority as a leader of the church. Repeatedly, James commanded his readers to live in a manner consistent with a sincere profession of faith. He used more than 50 imperatives, or direct commands, in his 108 verses. And he often used other grammatical forms that functioned just like imperatives within their contexts.

But James' principal solution to the problems his audience faced was not merely to command them to do this or that. For him, the heart of the matter was that they needed to pursue wisdom from God. Wisdom from God was the key to receiving joy as they endured their many trials. Listen to these well-known words of 4:8-10 where James told his readers:

**Come near to God and he will come near to you... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up (James 4:8-10).**

James directed believers to humble [them]selves so that God would lift [them] up. He taught that humility before God is a path to wisdom. And when Christ's followers draw near to God in humble submission, the wisdom they receive brings joy, even as they persevere through trials.

So far in our *Introduction to James*, we've looked at the background of James. Now we're ready to examine the epistle's structure and content.

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## STRUCTURE & CONTENT

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We've just suggested that the book of James focuses a great deal of attention on wisdom as the way to find joy in times of trial. But this emphasis on wisdom helps us

understand something more than just the purpose of this book. Many interpreters have spoken of the book of James as the New Testament book of wisdom. And this perspective also helps us grasp the unusual structure and content of the epistle.

By the time James wrote his letter, there had been a long history of wisdom literature stemming from the Old Testament. Old Testament wisdom writings include Job and Ecclesiastes, as well as the book of Proverbs and a number of so-called wisdom psalms and prophetic wisdom sayings. James' indebtedness to this Old Testament literature is evident in a number of ways. For instance, in 5:11, James used the example of Job, the main character in the book of Job, to promote perseverance. Beyond this, James touched on topics such as speech, the treatment of widows and orphans, poverty, and favoritism. These topics reflect numerous parallels with the content of the book of Proverbs.

**When we read through the epistle of James, one of the things that we see as a common thread is the word “wisdom.” He obviously values greatly wisdom — the wisdom from above as opposed to the wisdom from below. And that very value in wisdom and the structure of the epistle makes us think that there’s a great influence in his life on wisdom literature that’s come before him. Now, I think we see that most explicitly in his citation and use of the book of Proverbs, and also in the way that he remembers the words of our Lord, of Jesus, who also spoke often in a wisdom context... Alongside that, there was a development of wisdom thought and wisdom writing, a genre, really, of wisdom writing, in the intertestamental time. And I think we see some of the same themes through that wisdom literature in James. Occasionally we see the same structure. But I think a lot of the themes also were really started with the book of Proverbs and also with Jesus, and so I think the bigger influence on James is probably going to come out of Jesus and Proverbs. But that genre and the importance of proverbial wisdom throughout Second Temple Judaism, around the time of Jesus, is also very important in James.**

**— Dr. David W. Chapman**

The letter of James also reflects the content of influential wisdom books outside of Scripture like *The Wisdom of Sirach*, also known simply as Sirach, and *The Wisdom of Solomon*. These books were well known in James' day, and there are striking parallels to both in his letter. As just one example, in 1:26 from Sirach, we read:

**If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will bestow it on you.**

And James 1:5 tells us:

**If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (James 1:5).**

In addition to these types of wisdom literature, much of Jesus' instruction recorded in the Gospels is characteristic of wisdom teaching in Israel. And interpreters have noted a number of similarities between James' writing and Jesus' instruction. Consider, for instance, Matthew 5:10, where Jesus said:

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10).**

Compare this with James 1:12, where James wrote:

**Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).**

The wisdom literature of Judaism in the first century and a little bit before then had a considerable influence on James, especially in terms of the cultural and literary milieu that he was working with. In fact, there are dozens of allusions and parallels between James and other literature both in the Old Testament and in other Jewish literature. You know that James quotes from Proverbs twice, at least once and probably twice, and he has many allusions particularly to the wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach, a work that was written in, about a century before the time of the New Testament... But there is one thing that is unique to James in terms of wisdom, and that is, he links his wisdom very closely with the teaching of Jesus... James is probably one of the most colorful illustrators in the New Testament with depictions of ships being guided by little rudders, and farmers that are patiently waiting, and merchants that are travelling. There's many, many illustrations. That's all wisdom influence. But the content of James is really carrying forward the way in which Jesus presents the kingdom and the way the presence of the kingdom changes your life.

— Dr. Dan McCartney

Because of James' close ties to wisdom literature, the structure of the epistle is quite different from what we might expect. Even a brief look at this letter tells us that its organization isn't simple. In fact, from our modern point of view, it can seem quite disorganized. Much like the book of Proverbs, the book of James deals with a variety of important themes. And it often spends only a few verses on one theme before moving on to another. Occasionally, it returns to one or more of its themes later in the letter, but not with any consistency. Some commentators have even concluded that there is no structure to James. They've suggested that it's only a collection of wisdom sayings with no real order or flow of thought.

But we have to be careful here. This letter isn't just a chaotic jumble of unrelated verses thrown together without any order at all. Although the book of James resembles wisdom literature in both form and content, it also differs from that genre in a variety of ways. Unlike other wisdom literature, James is a letter written to specific churches. And for this reason, it does reflect some of the organizational features of other New Testament epistles.

There's little agreement among interpreters on the organization or structure of James. But for the purposes of this lesson, we've divided the book into seven sections.

- The epistle opens with James' greeting in James 1:1.
- The first major division is an introduction to the main themes of the book that we might call wisdom and joy in James 1:2-18.
- The second major division expresses James' concern for wisdom and obedience in James 1:19-2:26.
- The third major division deals with wisdom and peace in the Christian community in James 3:1-4:12.
- The fourth major division focuses on wisdom and the future in James 4:13-5:12.
- The fifth and final major division is devoted to what we may describe as wisdom and prayer in James 5:13-18.
- After these five major divisions there is a concluding exhortation in 5:19 and 20.

Let's take a closer look at each of these divisions, beginning with the greeting in James 1:1.

### **GREETING (1:1)**

Listen again to 1:1, James' short salutation:

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings (James 1:1).**

We shouldn't miss how James described himself here. He called himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." James could have introduced himself as the leader of the church, or even as the brother of Jesus. Instead, he chose to make the point that he was the servant of God and Christ. This dual reference may be James' personal statement of humility, a theme he touches on later in the book. Here he exemplified that humility by making it clear that he was the servant of his brother, Jesus.

Following the greeting, the first major division centers on what we've called wisdom and joy.

### **WISDOM AND JOY (1:2-18)**

James wrote his letter to Christians who'd been driven out of Jerusalem and were scattered around the Mediterranean world. They were facing different kinds of trials that

no doubt discouraged them. And for this reason, James' first words about the importance of wisdom began with a call to joy. Listen again to James 1:2 where James told his audience:

**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds (James 1:2).**

This passage may seem odd to us, especially because it addresses people who were facing "trials of many kinds." But James' appeal to consider trials "pure joy" is not as unusual as we might think.

The phrase "pure joy" comes from the Greek expression *pasan charan* (πᾶσαν χαρὰν) that may be translated "complete, unmitigated joy." This kind of encouragement fits well with other wisdom literature of James' day. Many times, wisdom writings encouraged those who suffered to consider themselves blessed. Jesus, for instance, closed the beatitudes in Matthew 5:12 with the call to "rejoice and be glad" in the face of persecution.

As we said earlier, in 1:3-4, James taught that perseverance through trials makes it possible for believers to be "mature and complete." In other words, when God's people endure hardship, they grow into the fullness of all that God intends for them. But in reality, it's often difficult for even the most sincere believer to see how this is true in the midst of suffering. This is why, in the very next verse, James told his readers to pursue wisdom from God. You'll recall that James 1:5 says:

**If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all (James 1:5).**

Those who want to have pure joy as they suffer trials must ask God for insight. They need wisdom to help them understand how their trials lead to their betterment. And if we ask for this kind of wisdom from God, he will give it to us. As James went on to say in 1:17, God gives good and perfect gifts to his people. James closed this section in 1:18 with this reassurance:

**[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created (James 1:18).**

When we receive the wisdom to understand how God works through trials, we can be joyful. Wisdom strengthens our confidence that God has ordained for us the blessing of eternal salvation.

After his discussion on wisdom and joy, James moved to the relationship between wisdom and obedience.



## **WISDOM AND OBEDIENCE (1:19-2:26)**

In this section, James discussed wisdom and obedience in three basic steps. To begin with, 1:19-27 introduces the importance of taking action rather than just listening or talking.

### **Action (1:19-27)**

In 1:22 we read this:

**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says (James 1:22).**

To hear the word is simply not good enough. The word of wisdom from God must also lead to faithful obedience. Otherwise, we are deceiving ourselves.

**When you read James' letter you understand that he's really emphasizing the need to put into practice the things that we say we believe. It's a very prominent theme throughout the whole epistle. We need to ask the question, why is James emphasizing that? And the first answer seems to be, James lives in the real world, he ministers to real people, and the world in which we live is a world where talk is cheap, where it's very easy to say we believe in God and much harder to follow through on what that belief might look like in action. This seems to have been a challenge not just for James but also for Jesus... Talking is not the same as doing. Jesus knows that. James knows that. They were trying to reach real people in a real world with a real problem.**

**— Dr. Jimmy Agan**

James expected his readers to do more than just hear God's word. He expected them to put their faith into action. This theme was so important to James that, although he mainly discussed it in chapters 1 and 2, he returned to it periodically throughout his epistle. For instance, in 3:13, James' basic perspective on the relationship between wisdom and obedience appears again. James wrote:

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom (James 3:13).**

As this verse indicates, wisdom and understanding of God's purposes in trials and suffering is no mere intellectual matter. Those who have it will show it by their good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from the wisdom that God gives.

So, in 1:27, James closed this section on the need for action by summing up true piety, or religion, in this way:

**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27).**

James speaks very frankly about religion — what he calls “pure and faultless” — being this: “To look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” And in our culture, which is so materialistic in many ways, those are two sides of the same coin, that one of the ways in which we get polluted by the world is not caring for the poor around us, or attributing their poverty to something only within them and not looking at the systemic causes of it, or looking at ourselves, who have means, as meaning that, that means that somehow we’re superior, or we have God’s blessing and poor people don’t, when the reality is that oftentimes what you find is the faith of the poor is stronger and more authentic than folks who haven’t suffered the same things that they have.

— Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

Following this introductory call to action, James elaborated on the connection between wisdom and obedience by focusing on the problem of favoritism in 2:1-13.

### **Favoritism (2:1-13)**

Some people within James’ audience had apparently been showing preference to the wealthy and neglecting the poor. And in this section, James addressed this problem by calling them to give proper attention to what he called “the royal law.” In 2:8 James said:

**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right (James 2:8).**

Essentially, neglecting the poor in favor of the rich is a failure to “love your neighbor.” And James taught that they must avoid the sin of favoritism by keeping the royal law.

We see in James’s teaching about the rich and their relationship to the poor, a real reflection of the Savior’s teaching in Luke 16. In chapter 2 of James, he talks about how, don’t you know that God has chosen the poor, those who love him, to be heirs of his kingdom... The rich are being shown partiality as they come into the Christian meetings.

**They're being shown deference — “You can take my seat; you can have the best seat in the assembly.” And James warns those who are acting that way to remember that the poor have full standing in the kingdom of God, full inheritance rights, and therefore they should be shown dignity and respect and full membership among the people of God as well.**

**— Dr. Greg Perry**

As we've seen, the book of James has a very positive focus on the law of God. In James' view, the law teaches us to care for one another, to have compassion on the poor, to avoid favoritism, and the like. But this positive outlook can be misused if we aren't careful. Modern Christians often point out how the law of God has been used, in vain, as a way to try and justify ourselves before God by our own righteous deeds. And we're right to reject this abuse of God's law. But, by contrast, the book of James stresses a different facet of the law. James taught that although no one can be justified by the law, the law of God is our source of wisdom. And we should live in obedience to it. Of course, we don't obey the law as if we still lived in Old Testament times; we must always apply God's law in the light of Christ and the teachings of the New Testament. But those who've trusted Christ for salvation obey the law out of gratitude to God, because it's the revelation of God's wisdom. In this sense, James echoes Psalm 19:7 where we read this:

**The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple (Psalm 19:7).**

After introducing the importance of action in response to the word of wisdom and resisting favoritism by obeying the royal law of God, James addressed the relationship between faith and obedience in 2:14-26.

## **Faith (2:14-26)**

In 2:14, James posed this question:

**What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? (James 2:14).**

James answered this question with a resounding “No.” He did this in a number of ways. First, he pointed out that even the devil believes true things about God, but it does him no good. Then he noted how Abraham's faith led to obedience. And he described how Rahab demonstrated her faith through good works. So, in 2:26, James drew this well-known conclusion:

**As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (James 2:26).**

According to James, having the right beliefs is not enough. A faith that does not show itself in obedience is dead. It is not true saving faith.

After exhorting his audience to live a life of obedience, James focused his attention on the relationship between wisdom and peace among followers of Christ.

### **WISDOM AND PEACE (3:1-4:12)**

Listen to James' question in 4:1:

**What causes fights and quarrels among you? (James 4:1).**

Although this verse comes in the middle of this section, in a variety of ways the entire section deals with this question.

In this section, James noted three main issues associated with wisdom and peace among believers. First, in 3:1-12, James focused on the tongue, or our use of words.

### **Tongue (3:1-12)**

In 3:4 and 5, James compared the tongue to a ship's rudder. He explained it this way:

**[Ships] are so large and are driven by strong winds, [but] they are steered by a very small rudder... Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts (James 3:4-5).**

Then in verse 6, he went further, telling his audience:

**The tongue ... [is] a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell (James 3:6).**

James' warning against the tongue's capacity for evil is very similar to what we find in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs also deals with the dangers associated with the tongue, or speech, a number of times. We find this in places like Proverbs 10:31; 11:12; 15:4; and many other verses. Both James and Proverbs pointed out that words can lead to all kinds of trouble among God's people. To avoid conflict and live in peace, we must control our tongues.

**When we come to the book of James and we hear him say things about our speech, we are probably reminded of the words of Jesus, when he says that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." And as James reflects on the words of Jesus and provides instructions**

for the church — how we are to live in the light of Christ’s coming and in anticipation of his future return — one of the ways that James gives us to measure our hearts is focusing on our words. In other words, James views the words of a person, the tongue, which is shorthand for the words, as a barometer of a person’s whole moral being. It gives the temperature — to put it in another way — it gives the temperature of one’s heart. And so, just as Jesus says, “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,” when James says that a man must bridle his tongue and it should not be that from the same mouth come blessing and curses, he’s telling us that our heart must be fully committed to God. We must not be a double-minded man, but we must, in faith, hold fast to the teaching of Christ, and as we do that, our words should bless our brothers and sisters instead of cursing them.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

The second issue tied to wisdom and peace, involves two kinds of wisdom. We find this in 3:13-18.

### **Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)**

In James 3:14-17 we read these words:

**If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts... such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic... But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:14-17).**

As we see here, to explain the relationship between wisdom and peace, James distinguished between earthly, even demonic, wisdom, and wisdom that comes from heaven. Earthly wisdom leads to bitter envy and selfish ambition. But wisdom from God brings peace in the Christian community.

James called for his readers to let go of their fights and quarrels. He explained that when we cling to our own selfish desires there can be no peace among us. Worldly wisdom, he taught, only leads to “disorder and every evil practice.” So, James instructed his readers to rely on the wisdom that comes from God. When we do this, we find peace. As James put it in 3:18:

**Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness (James 3:18).**

The third issue in this section, in 4:1-12, looks at wisdom and peace in relationship to the inward conflict that followers of Christ experience.

### **Inward Conflict (4:1-12)**

James traced strife among Christians to selfish desires, wrong motives, and discontent within us. From James' point of view, the evil desires within his audience had caused great damage in the Christian community. They were ruled by their wants. And because of this, they were fighting, and coveting, and even destroying each other. So, James sternly told them what they must do to bring peace. In 4:7-10, James said:

**Submit yourselves, then, to God... Come near to God and he will come near to you... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up (James 4:7-10).**

Only humble submission to God would put an end to their fights and quarrels and give them peace with one another.

Now, let's consider the relationship between wisdom and the future.

### **WISDOM AND THE FUTURE (4:13-5:12)**

James' discussion of wisdom and the future can be divided into three parts. The first part is found in 4:13-17 and deals with those who were making plans for the future as if God were not in control.

### **Making Plans (4:13-17)**

These verses indicate that many in James' audience were attempting to determine their own futures. They focused on accumulating wealth, and they bragged about what they would do and where they would go. In response to this, James reminded them that their lives were fleeting. They couldn't possibly know what their futures held. Listen to 4:15 and 16, where James told them:

**You ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil (James 4:15-16).**

Only God controls the future and those who are wise will acknowledge this.

In the second part of this section, James gave attention to wisdom and the future in a slightly different way. In 5:1-6, he warned against hoarding wealth because of the future day of judgment.

## Hoarding Wealth (5:1-6)

James spoke at great length about the treatment of the poor in many places. And he repeatedly condemned the wealthy for taking advantage of those less fortunate. In these verses, James strongly cautioned the rich who had gained wealth at the expense of the poor. And he informed them that they would soon suffer for it. As he put it in 5:3:

**Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days (James 5:3).**

As this passage indicates, accumulating wealth at the expense of others will bring severe judgment.

**What James basically says is something that would have been mind-blowing to many of the Jews who heard him. He basically reverses the understanding that many in Israel had about the relationship of rich and poor, and he actually calls the poor blessed and speaks about... He warns the rich to actually be ready to repent and to expect judgment... The basis for that judgment is these people are hoarding their wealth, which basically, if you've been blessed with wealth, God's will is that you would share this with your neighbor, use it to bless your neighbor, but they're hoarding it up for themselves. They're defrauding their workers by not paying them a fair wage... Wealth is a gift of God that is then to be used as God wills, not for yourself, but ultimately for your neighbor. In other words, every business should be guided by the principle, "Love your neighbor as yourself."**

— Rev. David Lewis

The third part of James' discussion on wisdom and the future, in 5:7-12, turns to waiting patiently for God's plan for the future to unfold.

## Waiting Patiently (5:7-12)

James had criticized those who'd made plans without relying on God for wisdom. And he'd warned those who'd ignored God's wisdom by hoarding wealth and abusing the poor that they would see God's judgment. But following this, James encouraged those who were suffering to wait patiently for God to bring the consummation of history to pass. Listen to 5:7 and 8 where James used this analogy:

**Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently**

**waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near (James 5:7-8).**

As we've just pointed out, James' words in this section did more than just admonish the wealthy. They also encouraged the poor and oppressed. James' strong rebuke reminded his audience that the Day of Judgment was coming. And at that time, those who had faithfully depended on God would be rewarded. In this way, he encouraged the faithful to continue on the path of godly wisdom, living out their profession of faith, obedient to God in the light of the grand finale of God's plan for the future.

After explaining to his readers how wisdom is related to joy, to obedience, to peace and to the future, the book of James closes with a short practical application of wisdom and prayer.

### **WISDOM AND PRAYER (5:13-18)**

James' audience was dealing with a number of issues. They'd been scattered from their homes. The rich were oppressing the poor. They were arguing and hurting one another. Many, it seems, were being ruled by their selfish desires. And they were finding it difficult to live in ways that matched their profession of faith. So, in this last section, James taught them what to do in the Christian community as they faced these struggles. Similar to what he taught at the beginning of the epistle, here James instructed them to devote themselves to prayer. In times of trouble or joy, when dealing with sickness, even sickness caused by the individual's sin, those who have wisdom will pray. Listen to 5:13 and 14 where James told his readers:

**Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him (James 5:13-14).**

Clearly, James expected his readers to draw near to God for wisdom in every situation. The reason for this is clear enough in verse 16 where James said:

**The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16).**

After finishing the main body of his epistle with his call to patience and prayer in trials, James ended the letter with an exhortation.

### **CONCLUDING EXHORTATION (5:19-20)**

In 5:19 and 20, James urged his audience to watch out for each other and bring back those who had wandered away from the truth. He reminded them that, as brothers



and sisters in the community of faith, they had the obligation and privilege to lead people back to a faith that truly saves.

## CONCLUSION

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In this Introduction to James, we've looked at the background of the book and noted the author, the audience, and the occasion of writing. We've also explored the letter's structure and content and seen how this book serves as the New Testament book of wisdom for believers facing the discouragement of trials through joy, obedience, peace, the future and prayer.

The book of James challenged first century Christians to seek God for wisdom so that they could have joy as they endured trials. Of course, you and I live in very different circumstances than the original audience of James. But we also do face trials, and we also need wisdom from God to help us deal with those trials. Just like James' first audience, we need the pure joy that God's wisdom brings. Although, in this lesson, we've only touched on what this book offers, one thing should be clear: The epistle of James charts a path for wise living in every age. And the more we apply this book to our own lives, the more we'll receive the blessing of pure joy that God offers his people, no matter what trials or difficulties we may face.

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# The Epistle of James

LESSON  
ONE

## Introduction to James Faculty Forum



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## Contents

<b>Question 1:</b> How significant is it that James introduces himself in his letter as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” rather than as Jesus’ brother? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b> What kind of weight would James’ brotherly relationship with Jesus carry in the apostolic church? .....	2
<b>Question 3:</b> Why is it important to know something about the Jewish background of James’ audience when interpreting this letter? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b> If we pray and ask God for wisdom, how can we be sure that the decisions we make will come from God’s wisdom and not from ourselves?.....	6
<b>Question 5:</b> What is wisdom literature? .....	8
<b>Question 6:</b> What kind of influence did the wisdom literature of Second Temple Judaism (the period between the Israelites’ return from exile in Babylon and the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70) have on the epistle of James?.....	9
<b>Question 7:</b> What is the relationship between wisdom and understanding? .....	11
<b>Question 8:</b> How does James tie together the themes of “true religion” and the “royal law”? .....	11
<b>Question 9:</b> What relevance do James’ instructions concerning the rich and the poor have in today’s global economy? .....	14
<b>Question 10:</b> Why did James place such a high value on “the tongue” as an indicator of a person’s spiritual state? .....	16
<b>Question 11:</b> How should we best understand what James calls the “prayer of faith” in James 5:15?.....	19

# The Epistle of James

## Lesson One: An Introduction to Joshua

### Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Richard E. Averbeck  
Dr. David Correa  
Dr. Dan Doriani  
Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim  
Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs  
Dr. Steve Harper

Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.  
Dr. Thomas L. Keene  
Dr. Michael Kennison  
Rev. David Lewis  
Dr. Ryan O’Leary  
Dr. Dan McCartney  
Dr. John Oswalt

Dr. Greg Perry  
Dr. Scott Redd  
Dr. Imad Shehadeh  
Rev. C.S. Tang  
Dr. Peter Walker  
Dr. Larry J. Waters  
Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

### Question 1:

**How significant is it that James introduces himself in his letter as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” rather than as Jesus’ brother?**

#### **Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

I love the way that James opens his letter... He’s Jesus’ brother, but he introduces himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I think it’ll carry weight with the apostolic church for a couple of reasons. One, that is, he’s Jesus’ brother, and people could have probably seen the progression in his life where he goes from not even believing who Jesus is and being upset at his ministry to being willing to die for it and lose his life for it a little bit later, which he does. And he’s a leader in the church, but yet, he doesn’t focus on that status as a point of glorification, or to try to glorify himself. He identifies himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s not putting himself above anybody else, but he’s uplifting Christ and recognizing that he’s more than just a human brother, but he’s the Lord and Savior of the world, of everyone. And so, it orders that relationship, with the first priority is a relationship with Christ as our Lord and then his brother.

#### **Dr. Jimmy Agan**

It’s pretty important that James is known as a brother of Jesus, a couple of things that that implies in the context of the early church. It’s a culture in which kinship relationships are very important, and so James’ testimony about Jesus and his teaching would carry weight in that kind of culture where kinship relationships weighed more than they might in the modern world. Another way in which this is important is that ... James had a reputation for being a man of piety and prayer, and so kind of an up-close study of the kind of impact that knowing Jesus has on someone’s life. In that way, you see also something of humility. And in a culture where kinship relationships mattered so much, it’s interesting that James doesn’t play that up as he opens the letter. He says simply, “I’m a servant of God and of the Lord

Jesus Christ.” He doesn’t take advantage of the fact that he’s Jesus’ brother. He doesn’t seem to be throwing his weight around, and in that regard, it seems that James probably learned a lesson very well from his brother Jesus. Jesus taught in Luke 8:21 that his mother and brothers were those who hear the word of God and do it. And certainly, if you read the book of James, you understand that this man learned that lesson — that hearing the word and doing it matters more — and it seems it mattered more to James, than identifying himself as the brother of Jesus.

**Dr. Michael Kennison**

When you look at the way James introduces himself in the book, “James, the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ,” you see nothing there of his brotherly relationship to the Lord Jesus. He, in fact, seems to avoid that connection. It does seem to me that there is a good reason for that. We read in John 7 that none of Jesus’ brothers believed in him during the course of his earthly ministry. None of them, including James, followed him. And James himself was not converted until the resurrection where Jesus appeared to him and apparently very quickly changed in heart. But all of this is completely eliminated from James’ introduction of himself. And nevertheless, he simply writes his name, assuming that all the world that received that letter would still know who he was. So, he didn’t put much stock in his human title himself. At the same time, it does seem to me that the early church paid attention to who he was because of how quickly he rose up through the ranks. He was recognized as a pillar of the Jerusalem church. When Peter was released from prison, he said, “Tell James and the brothers too that I’ve been released.” And so, we know that he was very early recognized as a leader. He was pretty clearly in leadership in Acts 15, when he helped to write that letter that went out to the entire church... Now, here’s what I think. I think, in spite of the fact that James had this pedigree, human pedigree, in our own experience when we think of one another, we don’t think of those things as commonly as we think of what we see in each other in terms of spiritual depth. So, James, who is known as a man of prayer, so that his knees were calloused from his prayer life, James who had a zeal for the law, James who cared for his parishioners, cared for the church with great passion, it seems to me that those spiritual qualities had much more to do with the church’s reception of his leadership than any human pedigree that we might name.

**Question 2:**

**What kind of weight would James’ brotherly relationship with Jesus carry in the apostolic church?**

**Rev. David Lewis**

I think it’s probably very likely that many people would have looked at James’ relationship with Jesus, that they were, I think, blood-brothers, half-brothers, that James was one of the four sons of Mary that she bore to her husband Joseph, that people would have thought that, well, this relationship is very unique, and it would have given this man a special prominence in the early church. And we know that

James ... was the leader of the Jerusalem church, it appears, after Peter and the other apostles began to extend their ministry from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and then eventually outside of Palestine. James was the guy who emerged, as the leader of that church, and it could well be it's because he was the brother of Jesus. However, what's really important, I think, for James, is not so much that brotherly relationship, because — this then should be interesting to you — is that James did not believe in Jesus during the time of his earthly ministry. So, in John 7, John, the author of the gospel, explicitly says, "For even his ... brothers did not believe in him." Later we see Mary and the brothers with the apostles in Acts 1, so they're with the Twelve. And so something happened from the time of Jesus' ministry until the beginnings of the church in Acts 1, and what that something appears to be is that Jesus, after his resurrection, revealed himself to his brother. This is revealed in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul gives a catalog of the witnesses of the resurrection. He throws in this guy named James, who doesn't seem to be James, one of the two apostles. This is James... When Paul mentions James, usually it's James the brother of Jesus... I think James sees himself properly in relationship to Jesus, that post-resurrection, Jesus is his Lord, his Savior. I think this is the most important thing James would say about Jesus: is not, "We grew up together in the same house," but, "He died for me. He rose for me. And he called me to faith, and it's as a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ that I now address all of you other servants of the Lord Jesus Christ." And so, it could very well be that people in the church thought of James' relationship to Jesus as, you know, their familial relationship, as the thing that gave him authority, but James himself, I think, would very humbly say, "No, my authority comes from the fact that I too am one who have been called to faith in Jesus through the gospel, and it is as such a person, as your fellow believer, as someone, you know, charged by God to preach and teach the word, this is my unique authority that I come to you now. And so, James would say, "You don't have to listen to me because I'm the brother of Jesus. Listen to me because I, like you, am one who has been called to the gospel, and what I'm telling you is God's word, not the word of Jesus' half-brother."

**Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

So we tend to think that James' relationship with his brother — that James is the brother of Jesus — would be a really big deal because of that special familial relationship, but what we find actually in the New Testament is that, while that's mentioned, what James is really known for is his wisdom and his leadership abilities... That's what sets him apart, is that he has been appointed by Christ for this work, for this duty. And so, what James really is known for is particularly his wisdom and the way in which he is able to apply the teaching of Christ to the needs of the church at the present moment.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

James is always referred to in the book of Acts as the brother of the Lord, the Lord's brother. And it's fair to imagine this brotherly relationship which he had with Jesus would have been an important part of how people viewed James. I think it probably gave him some of the authority, which he did have. We know from later church tradition that after James died, and they were trying to find someone who'd be in



charge of the Jerusalem church, that they actually were still seeking for members of Jesus' wider natural family, if you like, and I think a man called Simon became the bishop, or the leading Christian, in the Jerusalem church. So, family obviously meant quite a bit to that first generation. "This was someone who was really part of Jesus' family. Let's have him as one of our authority figures in the Jerusalem church." So, I think it is an important part of James' authority. It's interesting, isn't it, that unlike the other apostles, this one, we know, was not actually a believer at the time when Jesus began his ministry. According to the Synoptic Gospels, he didn't believe in Jesus' message and then is converted, if you like, when he meets the risen Jesus, according to 1 Corinthians 15. So, when they were looking for a replacement apostle, when Judas departs the scene, they're looking for someone who's been, as it were, with Jesus from the beginning, and they don't include James or any other of the members of the family. So, that's interesting that at that stage, perhaps, he didn't quite qualify because, although he had been around from the beginning, he hadn't been a believer from the beginning. But I think after that was got through, I think soon it became a natural thing to ask him to be in charge of the Jerusalem church... And we see that from Galatians 2 when Paul visits and sees Peter, John and James there in Jerusalem, and James has now assumed third place in charge of the Jerusalem church. And I think that continues in the book of Acts.

### **Question 3:**

**Why is it important to know something about the Jewish background of James' audience when interpreting this letter?**

#### **Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

Well, one of the things that's important with, really, every Bible book is knowing the audience, because it's very similar to listening to one end of a phone conversation — you can hear the one end, but then you kind of have to guess what's being said, or what's being asked — what questions are they answering in the book? And so ... it's helpful to know the Jewish background of James' audience. He opens up in the second part of verse 1 saying he's addressing the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, and so there are Jewish believers that are throughout. And as you read through the letter, you can see the references there to suffering, and so it's in the context of people that are going through suffering. And so, that makes more sense. Or, also, much of what James does is give imperatives — do this, do this — and there's not a lot so much of a background of the Old Testament, and that's probably because he's assuming that they're coming with the knowledge of the Old Testament already. And so, he feels like he can come with the imperatives because he's assuming they already have the indicatives, like, "This is what you do. This is how you live out this Jewish Christian faith now, that you have in the suffering context that you're in."

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

If you really want to understand the book of James, it's very important to know that the first readers had grown up Jewish, and they had converted to Christianity. And so, that means that the first readers of this book would have been intimately familiar with the Old Testament characters that James mentions: Job, Elijah toward the end of the book, Abraham and Rahab in chapter 2. James' audience would have known the full story, the full context, all the background. So he just needs to briefly mention a story and can assume all kinds of knowledge, because his readers would have grown up knowing the Scriptures. The other thing we recognize is James really highlights the importance of caring for the poor and mercy toward those in need. Almsgiving and care for the poor was a tremendous emphasis in the Jewish community, so it makes perfect sense that James would be driving home that emphasis for his readers as well. Maybe the most important thing, though, is how staggering the claims that James makes about Jesus would be since he's writing to a Jewish audience. Some readers look at James and they say, "There's not enough Jesus in this book. He only mentions Jesus a couple of times." But if you think about the fact that his audience was Jewish, and he opens the letter by referring to himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ — there it is, Jesus is "Lord," and we mention him right in parallel with God — for a Jewish audience, that's blasphemy, unless it's a Jewish audience that's come to be convinced that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. And so then, James opens chapter 2 by referring to his readers as "believers in our Lord of glory, Jesus Christ." And again, that's going to strike a Jewish audience, a Jewish background, as blasphemous, unless in fact these are readers who had come to be convinced that Jesus is the exalted, resurrected, ascended Lord and the Son of David, the Messiah. And so, when we hear those references, even though they're brief, they are so weighty because we understand how risky they would be in a Jewish background and environment. So, James is really going out of his way to affirm what Christians believed about Jesus.

**Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs**

Well, the question of interpreting James by realizing the Jewish nature of his audience is kind of an interesting question, actually, because it's a circular thing. Strictly speaking, we know nothing about James' audience other than what he calls them and how he appeals to them; so the fact that he calls them "the tribes of the diaspora." Of course, that's a very Jewish thing to say. Literally, the tribes of the diaspora would be the Jewish peoples who have been scattered after the Babylonian exile. But most scholars think that James is using that kind of metaphorically, that these are the believers who have been scattered, perhaps even scattered as the result of the persecution that arose when another James, the son of Zebedee, was martyred in Acts 12. So, he uses Jewish language to talk about them. He appeals to the Old Testament frequently as he's teaching them and exhorting them. So, the fact that his audience is Jewish is something that we infer from the letter itself. I think it's reasonable. Most people agree. So then you go back, and you think, okay, this is an audience that knows the Old Testament, that believes it, and that hold that the Messiah Jesus is the one who fulfills all of those promises and all of those

institutions. And so, again, it's just, "Okay, put on my Old Testament ears, put on my Old Testament eyes as I'm reading the letter James."

**Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

So, in a lot of New Testament books, it's really important to know the Jewish context, the circumstances surrounding the letter, the Roman context. You want as much information as possible about the background of the letter, because that helps you interpret it. If we had more information about what was going on at Corinth, we'd have a better handle on what Paul is telling the Corinthians in those two letters. That's the normal way we operate. But James is a slightly different kind of letter. It's actually written to a very broad audience, and it's not written to solve a particular theological problem. It's not written to address perhaps a heresy or a behavioral issue in one particular church. Rather, it's given to give instruction, general instruction relevant for all Christians — all Jewish Christians, all Gentile Christians — that they can use in their daily life to become mature, complete, perfect, lacking in nothing. That's what James is trying to do. So it's what we call — to talk about genre — it's what some have called a "secondary" letter. It's not written to solve an immediate situation or an immediate problem. So, when you consider that kind of letter, the context is important — knowing how Jews thought about this kind of thing, what was going on in these churches, what types of things they struggled with... So, the best thing that you can study to get a sense of what James is talking about is not so much historical background, but rather to look at the words of Jesus, to look at the teaching that Jesus offers in his context, to read and really appropriate the Old Testament, particularly Old Testament wisdom literature. And if you've done those two things, if you feel you've got a good beat on those two things, start pulling out various wisdom literature in the Second Temple period. Those are the kinds of contexts that are most important for the audience of James.

**Question 4:**

**If we pray and ask God for wisdom, how can we be sure that the decisions we make will come from God's wisdom and not from ourselves?**

**Dr. Ryan O'Leary**

So, if we pray and ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, and we want the assurance that it's from wisdom and not from ourselves, I think there's multiple things that we should consider and look at. Number one is, as we go forward, do we have Christ's peace in our heart? We're supposed to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Another thing I think we need to look at is, what is happening? How are we living in relationship to the Word of God? Are we honoring God's Word? Are we living in submission to God's Word? And another thing I think we need to look at is what are people seeing within the body of Christ? But there's a Proverb that says "there is wisdom in the counsel of multitudes," and so as we walk in fellowship of other Christians in the

church, they can speak into our lives, and they can help us tell whether or not it's truly from wisdom or came from ourselves.

**Rev. C.S. Tang**

I think when we ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, the Holy Spirit first of all would drive us to his Word and give us understanding on his Word. So, that's the first thing we must do, because we must not rely solely on the human heart, your inclination, your impulses because, you know, the heart is deep and can be deceptive. So, first of all, the Holy Spirit would drive us to his Word, for therein we find wisdom and gives us insight and understanding. And the Holy Spirit also dwells within his people, alright. When we ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, he brings other believers, godly believers, into your life who would counsel you. Yet, ultimately, there is that inner conviction that goes with it, but I would make sure that it is not contradicted, definitely, by the Word of God and by the counsel of other believers.

**Dr. Steve Harper**

I think, in my prayer life, one of the biggest questions that I have is, when I receive an impression, an insight, a thought, some sense of guidance or counsel, how do I know it's from God? Oswald Chambers got me over the hump on this when he basically says that, if you are a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and if your heart is to do the will of God, so far as you understand it, then don't agonize over that feeling or that question. Don't become scrupulous, is what he says. I think of it as taking your pulse, you know, always wanting to make sure that you are counting. No, your heart just beats. It just beats. And, you know, you don't count your respiration — how many times did I breathe in the last minute? You just breathe. And so, Oswald Chambers, when it comes to, "How do we know?" really says, "Don't worry about that a lot." Don't become overly scrupulous in trying to figure it out because God uses the natural processes of your thought life. God created us with brains, and minds, and hearts. And so, God uses those things. They're not antithetical. In fact, they may be the landing places for God's revelation. And that helps, but it doesn't completely solve the problem because we can presume. Some very tragic things have happened in the church when people have said and done things thinking they were doing them under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, when we do come to those points, ordinary things, routine things — say a good word, do a kind deed — we don't need to wonder whether God is inspiring us to do that very much. It is just what we know we should be doing. But when it comes to more critical things, then I think it's very, very important that we take those things to Scripture. God is not going to ask us to say or do something that violates his written Word. Every now and then we read a tragic story in the newspaper about "God told me to kill my family," or something, just these bizarre acts of deranged people. And, when I read those, I think, you know, if that person had just squared that with Scripture, it would have never happened... In issues of my life where it's not so natural, not so routine, not so everyday, another thing is to submit it to the tradition... There is a treasure trove of wisdom in the tradition. Sometimes it's harder to find because it's not always indexed, and there's not a concordance, but it's not that hard to find either. If you really want to find it, it's there. And I tell the students, we need to be surrounded by that "great cloud of

witnesses” because they will speak words to us that will not only encourage us, but they’ll also create some limits and boundaries around our lives, and that’s very important. Then the third thing, I think, is just to sit down with another Christian friend, and say, “I have been thinking about this,” or “I have been bothered by this,” or “I have been wondering about...” “What do you think about this?” “How does this feel to you?” “Would you go in and talk to your boss about this if you were me? I mean, what would you do?” Because, in some ways, those two minds are better than one. If you get two people who sincerely desire the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven, sometimes the best advice you get is just from another sister or brother who gives you a “yes,” or a “no,” or maybe a “not now.” And I think those are at least reasonable ways that we can receive impressions and act on those impressions with confidence.

### **Question 5:** **What is wisdom literature?**

#### **Dr. Richard E. Averbeck**

Well, we know of the wisdom literature largely through the books like Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes... There’s also other places where we have wisdom sayings and so on, but that’s usually what we talk about, is those books. Wisdom literature is very interesting for its connection, actually, to creation theology in the Bible. Wisdom literature tells us a lot about what it means to live well in the world as God has created it, and it tells us about what it means to be a person who knows the God who created it as well. So, there’s a lot in the wisdom books that connect us to God, but God uses this kind of literature to help us realize that we need to live with this in this world in ways that correspond to the nature of the world. And so, that’s why there’s so much connection between creation concepts and the way the world works and the wisdom literature.

#### **Dr. David Correa, translation**

Wisdom literature, or those books that are known as wisdom books, are the books in the canon of Scripture that deal with the practical application of God’s law in daily life. That is to say, these books ... teach God’s people how to live in a practical manner in a fallen world. And also, those books — those books we call the Wisdom books — wrestle with difficult questions, questions about situations like suffering. These are situations that sometimes perplex us, situations that leave us confused, like at times when we see that life isn’t the way it should be, that life isn’t how someone expected it would be for a person who fears the Lord. They are books that help us reflect on suffering, on the injustices in life, for example, how the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. They are books that help us understand that without the Lord’s law, without God’s Word, without the Lord, without faith in our Lord, we really can’t make much sense out of life. A life that is lived in this world independently of God, a life that doesn’t consider God, a life that — like the book of Ecclesiastes says — is lived “under the sun,” only leads to futility. And these books

teach us precisely how we can live in a world in which things aren't always as they should be.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

Wisdom literature in the ancient world is literature which is built upon what can be learned from experience. It is various kinds of reflection on experience. It is very commonly a part of the royal court. These are things that a young courtier needs to know not to get in trouble. But in general, it is the elder saying, "Here's what life tells us. Here's what works, and here's what doesn't work." So, that's wisdom literature in the ancient world. In the Bible, wisdom literature is found in three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. It also appears in several of the Psalms — Psalm 1, Psalm 37. But wisdom literature in the Bible is different from wisdom literature in the rest of the world because in the Bible the point is made that these things that are observed are not simply pragmatic — you do this because it works. The Bible is going to say it works because it is an expression of the character and nature of the God who designed the world. And that makes biblical wisdom literature rather different from wisdom literature elsewhere in the world.

**Dr. Ryan O'Leary**

The Scripture tells us that every good gift comes from God, and I think one of those things is wisdom. And so, wisdom literature is the material from the Bible that God has given us so that we can live a wise life, so that we can use his Word to live in a way that is pleasing to him.

**Question 6:**

**What kind of influence did the wisdom literature of Second Temple Judaism (the period between the Israelites' return from exile in Babylon and the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70) have on the epistle of James?**

**Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs**

The wisdom literature of the Second Temple period is kind of an important, kind of general background for the letter. It helps explain some of the stark contrasts that you see in the letter of James. For instance, this whole notion of the two ways with no middle ground — there's a way of life and a way of death. The Lord Jesus himself, of course, talks this way in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. And so, when you see James contrasting, for instance, the wisdom from above... It's very black and white. It's two paths — one leads to life; one leads to destruction. And depending on where you live in the world today and the culture in which you find yourself, this can sound very harsh or even unyielding, if I could say it that way. And yet it, simply, it reflects the Jewish way of talking. The Lord Jesus himself in his ministry talked this way. And it can help us kind of take seriously James' teaching without it sounding too harsh, if I could say it that way. But the fact of the matter is, there is death and there's life, and James is exhorting his readers to follow the way of life.

**Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

The wisdom literature in the Jewish Second Temple context clearly had a big influence on James. He's very clearly a part of that tradition... So when we think of a sage, of a wise teacher, we tend to think of somebody who's going up onto a mountaintop and, you know, a guru kind of, alone with his thoughts, learning about the nature of life, the universe and everything. That's not how the Jews in James' day tended to think about wisdom. Wisdom was something that you learned from a great teacher ... and it's clear that James considers himself a student of his ancestors, particularly the Old Testament and Jesus himself. So, when you consider the sage that James sat under, that sage was Christ himself. He sat at the feet of his Savior and really appropriated his words and applied them to a new context, the struggling Jewish-Gentile church of the first century.

**Dr. Scott Redd**

The wisdom literature of the Second Temple period had an incredible influence on the book of James. As a matter of fact, understanding how the wisdom tradition had developed since the exile is very helpful in understanding exactly why James goes the direction that he goes in his book. He's clearly interested in wisdom. He starts James 1:5: "If anyone desires wisdom, ask of the Lord and he gives it willingly; he gives it generously." This is also the presentation of the book of Proverbs. You see God as delivering wisdom to his people. He loves to share it with those who fear him. But of course, the fear of the Lord is the first thing. It's the foundation for Old Testament wisdom. And likewise for James, faith in the Lord is the basis. It's the foundation for true wisdom of God — "wisdom from above," as he calls it. We see a particular interest in the Second Temple wisdom tradition, a particular interest in drawing wisdom out of the Torah, out of the instruction of the Old Testament of Moses and the prophets. And you see James also take his discussion of wisdom in the same direction. He starts by saying, "Ask of God; he'll give it to you generously." But then he moves on into a discussion of God's Word. Then he says, if someone just reads God's Word, that person is not showing the wisdom of God unless the Word changes them, unless it has an effect on their life. And it's the same as we see in other Second Temple wisdom sages, for instance, the non-canonical book *Ben Sira*, where there's an incredible focus on the Torah as a foundation, as a wellspring, as a mine out of which wisdom can be drawn. And we see James, I think, having that same emphasis. God's Word is the ground. It's the wellspring out of which wisdom flows, but it has to have a transformative effect on your life. Someone who just knows wisdom, someone who's just building a sapiential or a theological inventory but not seeing actual change in their life, are not actually living out the kind of wisdom that the Lord calls his people to.

**Question 7:****What is the relationship between wisdom and understanding?****Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.**

Well, we know from Scripture, again, that wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord... So what is the wisdom? Well, the Holy Spirit will illuminate God's Word to us, to help us to make it clear as we study and as we read to make those things understandable to us. So, what is the importance of understanding? Well, I have to understand God's Word; that it has to be clear in my mind in order for me to apply it in my everyday life, but also to be able to apply it as we teach, as we preach, as we minister and disciple others. So, the connection of wisdom, one, is having that fear of God, understanding his revealed Word, and the understanding is, how do I apply it truthfully and honestly as God intended it to be, not how I want it to be, not how I understand it, but what was the original intent of the big "A," Author, God, and the little "a," author, the writers of Scripture?

**Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation**

There are many opinions and many ideas about the relationship between wisdom and understanding. Many times, the book of Proverbs makes parallels between understanding and wisdom. Theologians, in general, have followed what the book of Proverbs does, yet they've given more details to it. Understanding is to comprehend a certain piece of information, to know it. Same as when a teacher teaches something, and the student gets it. But this might be all there is to understanding, while wisdom extends far beyond this. This is what the book of Proverbs, or wisdom literature in general, focuses on. It's not enough to get accurate information about God, to know the law, to understand the commandment. Wisdom is to *live* the commandment. Wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is related to conduct and worldview in general. Wisdom creates this worldview and allows you to live according to this worldview. This is more profound, or we can say, superior, as it includes understanding too. You cannot live by wisdom, unless you have understanding. You need the understanding, but also you need what is more than just the understanding. You should have a worldview based on this understanding and live according to it.

**Question 8:****How does James tie together the themes of "true religion" and the "royal law"?****Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

So, for James, the language of "true religion" that he introduces in chapter 1 and the language of "royal law" which he talks about in chapter 2, those coordinate, they correlate very well together. The first thing to understand is, what does he mean by royal law? In what respect is the law "royal"? There's a lot of debate on that. There's a lot of differences, but my take on it, and the take of many commentators, is when he



says “royal law,” what he’s getting at is that the law comes to us Christians through Christ, through Christ the King, Christ as king — he’s prophet, priest and king — and as king, one of the things he does is he gives us the law. That’s what he’s doing in the Sermon on the Mount, is he’s giving Christians instruction in how to live. He’s giving them a renewed, fulfilled law. Go back to James 1, and you find this language of true religion. James 1:26:

**If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this:**

And so here James gives us his definition of what true religion looks like. It is:

**to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:26-27).**

Now that to our ears that sounds maybe overly specific, but it’s actually exactly what Jesus says, and it’s actually the fulfilled version of what Moses says — “love God with all your heart, mind, soul, will, body, strength,” etc., and then, “love your neighbor as yourself.” James is just saying the exact same thing. He’s just reversing the order. Love orphans and widows, love your neighbor, particularly the weak neighbor among you, particularly the one who can’t help themselves, and then keep yourself unstained from the world — love God, love God above all else.

### **Dr. Michael Kennison**

We ask the question, how does James tie together the themes of true religion and the royal law? ... It seems to me that James has on his mind Leviticus 19, where the King, the Lord God, the ruler of Israel, directs his people as to how they’re to be holy, and it shows up in its summary as, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But leading up to that, he speaks about care for the weak, for the oppressed, not showing partiality, not being an oppressor yourself and abusing those around you, but rather caring for those who are weak, watching out for those who are immigrants, those who are in danger. And so, if we see that in what we would call the “royal law” of Leviticus 19, and then we think James often quotes his brother in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, who also tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, it makes good sense to us that he would bring into his own requirements for his people, his call to true religion, that it would look very much the same way. And he speaks there about care for the orphan and the widow and then keeping yourself untainted from the world.

### **Dr. Dan McCartney**

The connection between the royal law, which James mentions in 2:8, is actually very closely linked with the notion of the kingdom, which he actually mentions in 2:5, just three verses earlier. The word is actually the adjective form of the noun form of “kingdom.” So, we could say, instead of royal law, we could say, “kingdom law,” and it’s, therefore, closely related to the kingdom, which in 2:5 James says the poor will inherit... And the point is that the expectation of God’s restoration of righteousness

— the kingdom of God — is the basis and the grounding for this kingly, or royal, or kingship law that he speaks of. So, his identification of the law of God is specifically in the context of that kingdom expectation... Now, when he mentions the royal law, that's immediately followed by a quotation from Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus identified as the second great commandment: "love your neighbor as you love yourself" ... And some people think that that is specifically the royal law or the kingdom law... It's certainly the case that James' interest is in reflection of God's character in caring for neighbor and seeing the law from that perspective as fulfilled, as Paul says, in "love your neighbor as yourself." So, the royal law is an application of this kingdom law to love neighbor... So, that's very closely related to true religion that James identifies in 1:27 as reflecting the character of God, because God cares for widows and orphans, and people who are in the kingdom of God are called upon to behave and to act as God does. If God cares for the widows and orphans in their distress, then people who are claiming attachment to that kingdom — that is, those who claim to have true religion — must also concern themselves with care for the poor and particularly widows and orphans in their distress. Now, that's not the only thing that James mentions in 1:27. He also speaks about keeping oneself unspotted from the world. I don't think that means simply making sure that scandals don't stick to you or that you don't get associated with the wrong kind of people. That's not what he's talking about at all. He's saying don't be taken over by the kind of drives and intentions and goals that the world might present to you as what you ought to be doing with your life. Stay focused on what God does, and in particular what Jesus did when he was here.

**Dr. Larry J. Waters**

Many feel that the main theme of the book of James is true religion. In fact, James says this in 1:27. He says,

**Pure and undefiled religion ... is ... to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27, NASB).**

This is also found in the Old Testament Scriptures throughout many of the Prophets, of course. So James, however, definitely pulls the perfect law, the law of liberty, and then finally the royal law all together in one book. It's just amazing how he does this. He sees the perfect law as referring to the moral and ethical teachings of Christianity that are based on the Old Testament moral law, probably the Ten Commandments. And he sees the perfect law, however, as brought into completion by the law of freedom or the law of liberty, which is found only in Jesus Christ. And so, you're able to take the perfect law, incorporate it into your life, and then live this liberty, live this law of freedom in Christ as the Holy Spirit works through your life to help you to live the life that you're supposed to live. We're no longer a slave to sin. We, as believers, are freed in Christ, and because we're freed in Christ and under the power of the Spirit, the Christian life becomes joyous freedom, something that we really enjoy doing. It's not a drudge for us to do it. It's not something where we're forced to do it, but it's something we do because it's joyous and happy to do it. Righteous living then

becomes evidenced in the royal law, and the royal law is, again, one of the most important things that we find in the book of James, because he reverts back to the Old Testament, ties it into the Gospels, and then explains it a little bit in his book. Because we go to Leviticus 19:18, and when we look at that passage it says, “love your neighbor as yourself,” and so he’s actually exemplifying this as the royal law... And so he brings these two together and saying again that the pure law, the perfect law, the law of liberty and the royal law, all work together to exemplify what Christ should be in our personal lives. And so, as believers, we’re admonished to live those righteous lives, and it’s exemplified in the royal law because it means that I, as a Christian, am loving others, and I’m exemplifying and showing that in everything that I do. True religion, then, is to love the Lord my God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength, and again, with all my mind, *and* to love my neighbor as myself.

### **Question 9:**

**What relevance do James’ instructions concerning the rich and the poor have in today’s global economy?**

#### **Dr. Michael Kennison**

Well, we’ve got to be interested in James’ instruction concerning the rich and the poor today, not just in the first century, but our global economy as it stands today must have application. And so, we need to think about that. James, as he’s speaking in the fifth chapter about the rich, sounds like one of the Old Testament prophets, maybe especially Amos, and certainly he’s affected by the outcry of the prophets against the rich who oppress the poor. At the same time, we need to recognize that in chapter 1, when he’s speaking to both the rich and the poor, he speaks to them as believers and gives them instruction on how to live in a godly fashion, whether they are rich or poor. So, we know simply being rich does not mean that you’re evil. Simply being poor does not mean that you’re righteous. It has to do with the brotherly relationship, how you use that condition, one way or the other. You can be righteous, or you could be a sinner in either state. So, we think about our situation today and ask the question, how would we apply this to ourselves? ... And so, James is forcing us to ask the question, maybe wealth is relative, but what about position? Does my position now put someone else whom I am to love at a disadvantage, where I overlook them, I neglect them, I don’t offer them the same opportunities that I do? And I think we’re learning ... that James is speaking to us about that problem. My children are teaching me that fair trade practice is important because the very countries that we visit with the gospel are oftentimes affected by little fads and trends that occur in this country, where we build up an interest in a certain kind of coffee or a certain product, and a smaller economy invests all of its effort and all of its resources in developing that product, and then we pull the rug out from under them by allowing that product to fall into disuse and to turn to something else. And we’re finding that James has effect on that issue too, that we really do need to think more broadly, how are we affecting

other cultures and other economies by the carelessness with which we throw out a product and pick up another? And so, James has great relevance to us today.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

It's really remarkable how quickly cities are growing in the world. We already have several cities that are called "megacities" — more than ten million people. It's estimated by 2050 that 66% of the world's population will live in cities. And yet, one of the things that's happening in cities is that we're seeing that the poor are starting to live along the edges, not only in places like Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, but also in the United States, where once the inner city was a concentration of the poor, now we're seeing the poor diffused to the city's edges. James really comes to talk about the importance of Christian witness in terms of our relationship to the poor and what the gospel has to say about the relations between the rich and poor. We see him warning against showing partiality to the rich in chapter 2, and then he even sort of talks as a prophet, challenging the rich in chapter 5. He says that, their wages, they've been withholding wages from the poor to protect themselves... In chapter 5, in particular, we see James talking in terms of lots that's happening in his world in terms of the Roman patronage system, where the wealthy and those with authority and positions of power would use their possessions and use their position to protect themselves, and also to create a dependency for those that they were supporting with their money. And so, James says, "You're withholding wages from those who work for you, and your silver and your gold is corroding, and it's crying out against you." And there we see James sort of echoing the prophet Isaiah and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament to say that's not the way that the righteous are to use their wealth. In the biblical context, in terms of our covenant relationships with one another, the rich are to use their wealth in order to share with the poor and to cultivate interdependent relationships, not dependent relationships, to cultivate dignity, mutual respect as mutual image bearers of God. And so, we're to live out a different way of life, a different script, a different story, not the Roman patronage system and not the way we use our wealth today to protect our positions of power, but covenantal interdependency.

**Dr. Larry J. Waters**

James devotes chapters 2 and 5 to the responsibility of the wealthy, or the rich, or the material-blessed Christian, as well as to the rich unbeliever. As a matter of fact, some have actually argued that the word "rich" that is used, especially in chapter 5, refers to unbelievers and not to believers. In chapter 2, we have "Mr. Goldfinger" that comes in with all of the nice clothing and the gold on his fingers, and then we have the man that follows him — and "Mr. Dirty-clothes" would be the idea there — and so they give preference to the rich man and they put the poor man in the back of the church. This really upsets James. He doesn't like this. But we might be talking about a wealthy Christian there that is given prominence, and he shouldn't be given that. But on the other hand, when we run across this word "rich," he's really talking to those who are unbelievers. He's trying to really hit them with the responsibility of coming to Christ. As a matter of fact, in James 5:5 he says,

**You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter (James 5:5, NASB)**

— a day of judgment. And so James here admonishes the wealthy, especially if he's a believer, not to show partiality or to expect partiality, but instead to show his love, and again going back to the royal law idea that is developed so well in James, is that he's trying to say, use your wealth in giving in a loving way. Now, oftentimes, those who have wealth — and I think James was hitting this very strongly — is that their tendency is to give money, and that's supposed to be all they have a responsibility to do. But it's really giving your time, your effort, your strength, all that you are to helping somebody else and getting into a relationship with those who are in need. And so, he is trying to get the believing wealthy to do that. The application, I think, is very clear. We who are wealthy... And by the way, most of us in the developed world are wealthy. I have been overseas enough to know that probably 95% of the world is poor in relation to those of us who are in a developed country. And so, we have that responsibility to invest in the poor, not just, again, to invest our wealth, not just to invest our money, but to invest our lives and ourselves and building a relationship with those who are in need. And it's not just poor for the sake of poor, but poor who are truly in need. Certainly, we should help the poor generally, but specifically to the poor believer so that the gospel of Christ might be propagated throughout the entire area where the particular poor are located... We have a biblical mandate to help others in genuine need, and that means not only giving of our material wealth but also the giving of ourselves in love and in care and in building a relationship with those that are in genuine need.

### **Question 10:**

**Why did James place such a high value on “the tongue” as an indicator of a person’s spiritual state?**

#### **Dr. Scott Redd**

James placed a high value on the tongue as an indicator of a person's spiritual state, and in doing so he draws a theme that's a major theme, not only in wisdom literature but also in the teaching of Jesus. If you go back and look at Proverbs 18, for instance, the tongue is depicted as not only giving life but also giving death. The words of the wise sage are a food for those who receive them faithfully. And so, words are more than just merely human expressions, but they actually have force, they have power. They not only express what is within the person's heart, but they also nourish those who hear it, or conversely, they wound those. They are a danger to those if they're not valuable, if they're not good words, if they're not faithful and wise words. Jesus, likewise, says that the things outside of the body do not defile it, and therefore, he's making commentary on the holiness code of the Old Testament. But rather, he says what's much more important is what comes from within the body out, those are the words of a person. It's actually the words of a person that defile them, the false

teaching, but not the things outside of the body — it's in Matthew 15 where he has that discussion. So, James is drawing off of this theme, and he's likewise saying the tongue has power. The tongue can give life, but the tongue can also bring death. It can also draw people away from God. It's like a rudder that steers a boat, and even though it's a small thing, it can steer a great ship to change course.

**Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation**

The question James raised about the tongue has such a high value in a person's life. In fact, James starts chapter 3 specifically with the teachers. Teachers naturally use their tongue. But more than just teachers' use of the tongue, there is also the normal, daily use of the tongue. We are responsible, whether we are formal teachers or simply teaching in our conversations with others — such as parents with their children or friends:

**Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1).**

There is a huge responsibility on us for what we say:

**For we all stumble in many ways (James 3:2).**

And we have to be careful. He's highlighting the responsibility to be careful for what we say. Then, he gives us three pictures to illustrate the influence and the power of the tongue on life and society. The first example is the picture of horses:

**If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well (James 3:3).**

We can direct a big horse just with this small bit. The point is that we can control a big body with this small piece. This is one. The second picture is for large and great ships:

**[T]hough they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder (James 3:4) ...**

at the back of the ship. Once again, a small piece controls a big object. Then the third picture:

**How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! (James 3:5)**

So also, a fire starts with a small flame and can become a huge fire blowing through a forest or an entire city. The same thing happens with the tongue. It has great influence. That is why James continues by saying:

**And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness...**

I mean, the words are very strong:

**The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body ...**

In other words, if I do not control my tongue, it could stain my life:

**setting on fire the entire course of life ...**

affecting everything around me. We all know this from human history, from heads of state:

**and set on fire by hell (James 3:6).**

Wherever there is an uncontrollable tongue, there is an evil movement from hell! That is why James places a high value on our human responsibility to control our tongues.

### **Dr. Peter Walker**

James 3 is an extended accusation of the tongue as being a really bad part, if you like, of the Christian life. Why is he wanting to tame the tongue so much? Well, I wonder if it's partly because of the influence of Jesus, again, who taught so much that it's what comes from within us, which is actually what defiles us. You remember that teaching in Mark 7 where Jesus said it's not what comes from outside which defiles a person; it's what comes up from within. And so, the tongue is, if you like, the gateway to our interior, what's going on inside my character, myself right now. And our words express what's inside. And Jesus had spoken so much about, you know, fruit trees, making sure that the fruit matches what the tree is meant to be. And, as I say, James is picking up on this idea that our own interior life, if there's poison, if there's darkness inside, where it's going to come out through the tongue. And so, I think it's the influence of Jesus. But another reason perhaps why he focuses on the tongue is, sadly, he's probably already experienced, in the early Christian communities, the damage that the tongue can do, whether it's just gossip from people or people being rude about their leaders, or being negative about the Gentiles coming into the church. Whatever it is, people can do an incredible amount of damage with the tongue. He says, you know, this small thing can cause just havoc, you know. It can cause like a great fire to be emblazoned. I think that probably, sadly, it's because the early Christian community was no better at using the tongue than you and I are, and he'd seen the damage it can create. I think finally, perhaps he's just very aware of the role of teachers and what a responsibility we who teach or preach do have in the Christian church, and we can do incredible damage if we're teaching things which are untrue doctrinally, but also incredible damage if we are saying, coming out with all the right things, but we're doing it in the wrong manner, without a loving heart. You know, Paul warned about not having love in our hearts, and if you're teaching truth but in an unloving spirit, it's our tongue, if you like, that reveals it. There was a great preacher in the seventeenth century who said, "You can undo a whole sermon by just one careless word later in the week." And I think we need to be very careful how we use our tongues.

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

Chapter 3 of James is powerful in terms of it speaking about the power and the influence of the tongue, and there are some amazing analogies here. The example of the rudder of a boat being small but being able to guide the whole ship — it's a great analogy. And I believe he does that because the tongue is a real indicator of what's in the heart, that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." And I love what he says here. It's very challenging. In verse 9, of chapter 3:

**With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be (James 3:9-10, NIV).**

And it's amazing how deep that is, because he's rooting that command about the tongue in us being image bearers of God, that when we curse someone else, it doesn't make sense to praise God and then curse a person that's made in the image of God. Those things are inconsistent, and it reveals a heart that has a problem with God, if I'm cursing someone that's made in that image. And so, the tongue is maybe the greatest indicator of what's really going on in our heart, because it doesn't come from nowhere. What comes out of our mouths comes from within. It's just a question of whether we want it to or not.

**Question 11:**

**How should we best understand what James calls the "prayer of faith" in James 5:15?**

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

James 5, James says something that's widely disputed, and it comes from verse 15. The context is somebody who's sick, and they call on the elders to pray over them, and then it says this. It says,

**And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed [any] sins, he will be forgiven (James 5:15).**

And on it goes. So, what is the prayer of faith that will raise up the sick person? And in some circles it goes like this: Somebody's sick, they're very sick — not a little cold, but they're really sick — and so it's major, and they call the elders of the church, the godly, the caregivers, the shepherds of the church to exercise their function and to care for this person by praying for God to heal. And then it says, "the prayer of faith ... will raise him up." And some people say, "Well, you see, the quality of the faith of the pray-ers determines what will happen." So, if someone doesn't get better when they're being prayed over and they're sick, then it's because you didn't have enough faith, which of course, makes faith into more of a subjective



reality than objective reality, we could say. There is such a thing as strong faith and weak faith, but we're fundamentally misconstruing things if we say faith looks inward to the qualities of the believing self. Actually, faith looks upward to the object of our faith and his power... So, I think the main idea is that you pray and say, "We believe God can heal you, and we're asking you, Lord, to heal this person right now." Now, of course, the next line is, "And the prayer of faith" will raise the sick person up. I don't have time to go into it, but James, like many New Testament authors, is comfortable with ambiguity, so "raise him up" is resurrection language. Could it be that that person will be raised from their sickbed? Yes. Could it be they'll be raised up on the last day at the resurrection of the just when we all are restored to our bodies? Yes. So they both work. But I think it would be a major mistake to say that God heals through prayers based on the quality of the faith. Over the years, I have prayed over dozens of people who are sick, and any number of them have gotten better including some immediately, instantaneously, dramatically. But in a way, the happiest of them all is a time when I prayed over my own daughter, a number of years ago by now. And she had a lot of allergies at birth and had a ferocious, angry, blistering, hot, pink rash basically from her neck to her ankles. So, her face looked great and her palms of her hands and the soles of her feet, and the rest of her was just a massive, angry, blistering rash, and she would just tear at her flesh every time we would change her or give her a bath. She would scream. It was awful. During those same days, I was praying regularly over people in the church that I attended and, you know, some were getting better, and others weren't. And I was the leader of the ministry because I'd spoken on it, and people were kind of looking to me, along with others, of course — we were praying together — and so I thought, you know, I'm the one leading this ministry, surely my prayers are enough. I was praying privately for months, and for some strange reason didn't find it possible to go to my... You know, it's just a rash, and we're praying for her, so why should we call the elders for a rash? It was actually a life-dominating rash, and we finally did decide to call the elders and pray over her. And I would have to say, I've never been lower in all my life when I prepared to pray about anything, let alone healing, than I was that day. I was just crushed, defeated, dark, but obeying. You know, we've gathered elders for others; we're going to do it for my child. And a couple hours later I heard weeping, soft tears, upstairs, I thought. I was reading a book downstairs, and I walked to the bottom of the stairs and said, "Is somebody crying upstairs?" to my wife and three children at the time, and I didn't hear an answer. So, I sort of walk up the stairs, and I saw my wife in the bathroom at the top of the stairs, and she was shedding tears of joy, and she was giving our daughter a bath, and she said, "She's playing in her bathtub. For the first time in her life, she's playing in her bathtub." And her skin went from 98% blistering, angry rash to a little spot on her back and a little spot on one leg. I mean, in 2 hours her skin became 98% pure. And, you know, God answered our prayer that day, even though I was not full of faith. And I know my wife and I had prayed over her so many times. So we didn't have robust faith, that's not why God chose to heal our child that day. God chose to give us a sovereign gift. And that's who he is. He gives gifts apart from the quality of how we're doing it, apart from the vicissitudes of how we feel and how robust our faith seems to us on any given day. God is gracious.

**Dr. Michael Kennison**

How are we to understand what James calls the “prayer of faith”? ... What causes consternation in that passage is that there’s no qualification given, that it simply is the case that God will save him, meaning in a physical way he will, in the parallel, be raised up physically. And so, it does sound, doesn’t it, that we’re being given a promise that, as that prayer is prayed, every person who prays it will be healed of physical ailment. The difficulty with that is that even Paul was not healed from his “thorn in the flesh,” though he prayed, and we would expect that he prayed in faith, three times, asking God to deliver him. When I was young, I attended a service, a gathering of believers, where there happened to be a crippled man in the midst of the crowd, and among other things, their attention turned to him and they began to pray that God would in fact raise him up, and I think in accordance with this verse. And they went on in their prayer for some 10 or 15 minutes, and when nothing happened, one man stood up and actually accused him that he failed to be healed because of his lack of faith and was castigated for that lack of faith. Is that the right approach, when we think of a verse like this that James means to be an encouragement? Well, I do think that we are to take it seriously, that we are to believe that God heals, and that we’re to believe that he answers prayer. We’re also reminded that God is sovereign and that even in Paul’s case, as in many other cases, what God determines to be best for us is not always rescue. It’s not always rescue from the brokenness of the world. You think of the number of people who have suffered affliction, and in their testimony before the Lord Jesus Christ have had tremendous impact on the church. We can understand why God might choose not to heal every person but to allow the affliction to work on us in a spiritual sense. And so, what we’re thinking in a thing like this is that, since God himself is the one who gives faith, if it is not his desire that a person should be fully healed, then he doesn’t give the faith necessary for the healing either. And so, we can take this without qualification, and yet, recognize that there are many times that God chooses not to heal us physically, but to finally heal us in the new heavens and the new earth.

**Dr. Dan McCartney**

In James 5:15, where he speaks about praying in faith, or the “prayer of faith,” which can help a person become well and even be saved, that is actually closely related to the faith that is mentioned in 1:6-8, which speaks about a person asking for wisdom in faith, not doubting, because if he doubts, he’s double-minded. In other words, James — actually, this is a good point to underscore the fact that James actually is not the book about works — James is driven by a concern with faith. In fact, he mentions faith in chapter 1, and in chapter 2, and in chapter 5, and certainly aspects of faith in even 3 and 4. So, James is actually driven by a concern for faith, but he’s also, for that reason, concerned that it be genuine faith. At any rate, the concern with the prayer for faith is not thinking that somehow if you can just notch your faith up to a certain level to convince yourself that God will really give you this, that then God will actually give it to you. That’s not what James has in mind at all... What James is really talking about with faith is a faith that is driven by undivided loyalty. That is, he’s not two-souled. There’s a word that James uses there in chapter 1 that speaks of the man without faith as of “divided mind.” And the point is, a person who sits on the

fence, who isn't willing to commit strongly and completely to God as his Savior, is somebody who is unstable, James says. That's the kind of unbelief that James is concerned to avoid. So, the prayer of faith is the prayer that is committed. What that means as well, though, is that it's a prayer that is willing to submit to whatever God's answer is. That's not "name it and claim it," as though you can somehow get God to do what you want him to by screwing your faith up, but rather, a prayer that is acknowledging God's sovereignty and his goodness and his intent to save or rescue people, as he says in chapter 5 there, that God will raise him up ultimately at the last day in the resurrection. We all know that Christians do in fact get sick and die, no matter how strong their faith — that's not the point. The point is that God ultimately rescues in eternity people who really trust in him and have undivided loyalty to him.

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# The Epistle of James

LESSON  
TWO

## TWO PATHS OF WISDOM



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Reflective Wisdom .....</b>	<b>2</b>
A. Need	2
1. Challenge of Trials	2
2. Many Kinds of Trials	3
B. Guidance	5
1. Testing	5
2. Perseverance	6
3. Maturity	6
4. Reward	7
C. Faith	8
<b>III. Practical Wisdom .....</b>	<b>10</b>
A. Need	10
1. Earthly Wisdom	12
2. Heavenly Wisdom	13
B. Guidance	14
1. Standard of God's Law	14
2. Priorities of God's Law	16
C. Faith	18
1. Faith and Works	18
2. Faith and Justification	19
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>21</b>

# The Epistle of James

## Lesson Two

### Two Paths of Wisdom

#### INTRODUCTION

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At one time or another all of us have faced challenging situations that have been confusing and discouraging. And in those circumstances we've often wished that we could find a friend who understood what was really going on and who could give us some practical advice to follow. Such a friend would be a source of wisdom that would bring us great joy.

In many ways, this is how it was for the early Christians who first received the New Testament epistle of James. They faced challenging circumstances that had left many of them confused and discouraged. And James wrote to give them wisdom. He wrote to remind them of God's *good* purposes for their circumstances. He let them know that God offered reliable guidance that they should follow. And he assured them that if they would embrace the wisdom of God, they would experience great joy.

This is the second lesson in our series on *The Epistle of James*, and it focuses on one of the main, unifying themes of James. We've entitled this lesson "Two Paths of Wisdom," because we'll be exploring how this book offered two types of wisdom from God to the early church. And, we'll see how it provides similar directions to us as followers of Christ today.

In our previous lesson, we saw that both the structure and content of James reflect well-known Jewish wisdom literature from the first century. And we summarized the original purpose of the epistle in this way:

**James called his audience to pursue wisdom from God so that they would have joy in their trials.**

James actually used the terms "wisdom" — *sophia* (σοφία) in Greek — and "wise" — *sophos* (σοφός) in Greek — in only two portions of his letter. We find these terms in 1:2-18 and then again in 3:13-18. These passages are particularly important because they each refer to one of the two paths of wisdom James called his audience to follow.

Now, we should note that when some people think of wisdom in the book of James, they think of James' distinction between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. And we'll explore both these types of wisdom later in this lesson. But for our purposes, we'll focus on the two main paths of wisdom commonly distinguished within Jewish wisdom traditions. The first is what we may call "reflective wisdom," and the second we'll call "practical wisdom."

Reflective wisdom is represented most clearly in books like Job and Ecclesiastes. These books search for insights into God's purposes behind trials and troubles. Practical wisdom, on the other hand, appears most prominently in the book of Proverbs. This is a book devoted primarily to advice and guidance for everyday life.



As we explore these two paths of wisdom found in the book of James, we'll consider first the way of reflective wisdom. And second, we'll look at the way of practical wisdom. Let's begin with James' attention to reflective wisdom.

## REFLECTIVE WISDOM

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All of us have faced situations that we think we understand, only to find out that we were mistaken. We often have to look beyond appearances and take a second, more careful look to see what is really going on. In many ways, this is how James began the main body of his book. He called on his audience to look beyond the appearances of discouraging circumstances, and to gain insights into what was actually happening in their lives.

We'll explore how James dealt with this kind of reflective wisdom in three ways. First, we'll note the need of his audience. Second, we'll see the guidance that James offered them. And third, we'll note the connection between reflective wisdom and faith. Let's look first at the need James' audience had for reflective wisdom.

### NEED

In our previous lesson, we learned that the original audience of this epistle consisted primarily of early Jewish Christians. They had most likely been forced out of Jerusalem by waves of persecution following Stephen's martyrdom. And it's clear from what James wrote that many needed help with discouragement and confusion as they faced serious trials in the lands to which they'd been scattered.

In James 1:2, we can see that James was preoccupied with these needs. Immediately after the opening verse of his letter he wrote:

**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds (James 1:2).**

To understand the need of James' audience, it will be helpful to look at two dimensions of this passage. First, we'll examine the challenge of trials. And second, we'll explore the many kinds of trials that James' audience faced. Let's begin with the challenge of trials.

### Challenge of Trials

In James 1:2 the term translated "trials" is the Greek noun *peirasmos* (πειρασμός). This term can be translated "trial," "temptation" and "test." In a similar way, its verbal form *peirazō* (πειράζω) can be translated "to try," "to tempt" and "to test." Understanding the range of these possible translations helps us grasp the circumstances facing the

original audience of this epistle. In effect, they faced difficult *trials*, and these trials brought *temptations* their way for the purpose of *testing* them.

Unfortunately, modern Christians often diminish the significance of what James had in mind because we treat trials, temptations and tests as entirely distinct ideas. But, Scripture, especially wisdom literature such as the book of Job, presents these concepts as facets of every challenging circumstance that God's people face.

Challenging circumstances are trials because they are difficult and require endurance. But such circumstances are not morally neutral. They are temptations to react in wrong or sinful ways. And challenging circumstances are also tests from God. They are the means by which God tests and proves the condition of our hearts.

Keeping in mind the need resulting from the challenge of trials, we should also note that in 1:2 James mentioned many kinds of trials.

## Many Kinds of Trials

When James spoke of many kinds of trials, he pointed to a number of difficulties that involved turmoil and controversies between poor believers and wealthy believers in the early church.

On the one side, James wrote a lot about the challenges facing poor believers. According to Acts 2–6, there were many who were poor in the early church in Jerusalem. And because James wrote to believers that had been scattered from Jerusalem through persecution, the number of poor had most likely increased.

In 1:9 and 4:6, James called these Christians the “humble,” or *tapeinos* (ταπεινός) in Greek. This term meant “of low social status.” In 2:2, 3, 5 and 6, he also called them “the poor,” or *ptochos* (πτωχός) in Greek. This term meant “economically deprived.” In 1:27, he referred to “orphans and widows.” The Scriptures often identify this group as particularly vulnerable to poverty and mistreatment. In 2:2, James indicated that some of these impoverished believers wore “filthy old clothes.” And according to 2:15, at least some of them were so deprived that they were “without clothes and daily food.”

**James places a heavy emphasis on the poor. It's easy to short-circuit what James is trying to tell us by assuming that what he means is poor in spirit. He certainly means that we should be humble, we should be poor in spirit, but he is addressing the needs and the circumstances of the physically poor. Similar to Luke in his version of the beatitudes, it's “blessed are the poor.” And what James, at least, means by that is the physically, the materially poor. Well, why would they be particularly blessed? Well, it has to do with the way the kingdom works. The kingdom is all about exalting the weak and humbling the strong. You can do that in this life. You can humble yourself if you are rich, if you are powerful, if you are influential. The goal for James is to cultivate a sense of humility, of poverty, to be poor in spirit. But it also has a lot to say about people that are actually poor, that your treasures are in heaven, that your kingdom is in heaven, that your**

**reward, that your resources are all heavenly in character. And so there's a great eschatological reversal that's coming, one which will make the weak strong — God will gather in the remnant, he will gather in the sick, he will gather in the poor, and he will exalt them in his kingdom — and one which will humble the strength of the proud.**

**— Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

James mentioned a number of specific challenges facing the humble and poor in the church. To name a few, in 1:9, he noted that some of them were tempted to self-denigration. They had failed “to take pride in [their] high position” as people chosen by God for the glory of eternal salvation. According to 3:9, their circumstances often tempted them to curse others, even as they professed honor to God. In 3:14, James warned that some were tempted to “harbor bitter envy” toward others and to become consumed with “selfish ambition.” As a result, 4:1 addresses the temptation to become involved in “fights and quarrels” within the church. And in 5:7, James challenged the poor to avoid impatience by calling on them to wait patiently for the Lord’s return.

On the other side, wealthy believers also faced trials. According to Acts 2–6, at least some in the early church in Jerusalem had enough wealth to care for their poor brothers and sisters in Christ. And apparently, even though they’d been scattered through persecution, there were still many in the church that were considered well-to-do.

James described these wealthy believers in a number of ways. In 1:10, 2:6, and 5:1, James simply referred to them as “the rich,” or *plousios* (πλούσιος) in Greek. This was a common term for the upper class of society. According to 2:6, their social status was high enough that they regularly took others into court. Chapter 4:13 tells us that they traveled on business to make money. Chapter 5:2-3 indicates that they took pride in their clothes and their gold and silver. And in 5:5, at least some of them could be described as living “in luxury and self-indulgence.”

James knew that wealth brings its own challenges. According to 1:10, the rich were tempted to take pride in themselves by forgetting the humility that had overtaken them as repentant sinners. Chapter 1:27 tells us that their wealth tempted them to become “polluted by the world.” Chapter 2:7 indicates that they were tempted to blasphemy by bearing false witness in court. In 2:16, James said that they were inclined to do nothing for the poor. According to 3:9, along with the poor, they cursed others as they pretended to honor God. In 3:14, we learn that they harbored their own kinds of “bitter envy” and “selfish ambition.” They also engaged in fights and quarrels according to 4:1. Chapter 4:13-16 tells us that they were tempted to live as if they were independent of God. And 5:3 mentions that they hoarded wealth.

Clearly, both rich and poor believers in James’ audience faced a number of challenges. And both needed the wisdom James offered in his epistle.

Now that we’ve seen how James’ attention to reflective wisdom stemmed from the need created by the trials his audience faced, we should turn to a second issue: how James offered guidance for those trials.

## GUIDANCE

We can understand many facets of Christian theology simply through our daily experiences as followers of Christ. But other Christian teachings aren't as simple. If we want to go behind the curtain of our experiences into a deeper awareness of God's hidden purposes, we need guidance. And James offered penetrating insights to help us acquire reflective wisdom — the ability to discern God's purposes behind the struggles and trials in our lives. Listen to James 1:3-4 and the way James described the insights he wanted his audience to embrace:

**You know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:3-4).**

There are many ways to summarize James' guidance in this passage, but for our purposes we'll draw attention to four elements. First, James said that their challenging circumstances were testing their faith.

## Testing

When James described the challenges that his audience faced as “the testing of your faith,” he used the Greek term *dokimion* (δοκίμιον). This term means “testing” in the sense of determining or proving the genuineness of something. In this case, James had in mind proving the genuineness of their faith.

In effect, James explained that God's purpose for the many trials that his audience endured was to determine the true condition of their hearts. Their “testing” confirmed whether or not their faith was genuine. This perspective on God's purpose for trials was not something new to James. It appears numerous times in both the Old and New Testaments. For instance, in Deuteronomy 8:2, Moses said this to the people of Israel:

**Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart (Deuteronomy 8:2).**

It's clear from the rest of Scripture that God knows all things, including the hearts of all people. But this and similar passages illustrate the biblical truth that, as God interacts with his people in history, he often uses difficulties to prove or display what's in our hearts.

As James offered guidance, he not only established that his readers' challenges were testing their faith. He also indicated that their trials were designed to produce perseverance.

## Perseverance

James wrote that testing produces perseverance using the Greek term *hupomoné* (ὕπομονή). Much like our English term “perseverance,” *hupomoné* means to bear up under difficulty. So, James explained that trials proved the sincerity of faith by enabling God’s people to endure and continue in faithful devotion to Christ.

In general terms, New Testament teaching on Christian perseverance is twofold. On the one hand, perseverance is a gift of God’s grace. Passages like Romans 6:1-14 teach that followers of Christ are able to endure or persevere in their faith because the Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus to new life, empowers us to walk in newness of life and faithful obedience. So, although perseverance requires human effort, we need to remember that we only persevere by God’s ongoing grace at work within us.

But on the other hand, the New Testament also makes it clear that perseverance is a necessary requirement for eternal salvation. In other words, those who have exercised saving faith will, of necessity, persevere in their faith. Listen to Paul’s words in Colossians 1:22-23:

**But now [God] has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight ... if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel (Colossians 1:22-23).**

Here Paul affirmed that the Colossian Christians had been reconciled to God. But they could be confident that this was true only if they continued in their faith. This requirement of perseverance was not contrary to the message of salvation by God’s grace. Rather, it was the hope held out in the gospel.

In his guidance, James not only discussed the testing of faith that produces perseverance. He also went on to speak of the maturity that would result from perseverance.

## Maturity

**James is a book that’s all about Christian maturity. Some can approach it and think this is a book about legalism; it’s about rules; it’s about doing exactly what I need to be doing. But it’s actually a book that’s intended to help you develop as a Christian, particularly as a Christian living in all of the difficult social contexts in which we live. The church can be a difficult place to be in; James recognizes that. And what you need to do to survive in this world, in the church, to flourish in this world and this church, is maturity; you need to be perfect and complete. And James actually tells you how to do that, how to go about this life of becoming mature, ready for whatever the world, whatever the Devil, whatever the flesh might try to throw your way. And it begins, what’s interesting about James is it actually**

**begins with suffering. Suffering is the crucible; it's the context; it's the gym within which Christian maturity takes place. That's where your faith is cultivated and grows and is prepared for what is to come. As you endure suffering, temptation, and trial, and survive, your faith, through the Spirit, working in the Word, through Christ and his law and his wisdom, your faith is increased, strengthened, and prepared for the trials to come.**

— Dr. Thomas L. Keene

Listen again to what James wrote in 1:4:

**Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:4).**

Because trials and perseverance produce maturity, James told his audience to let perseverance finish its work. Perseverance would make them mature, complete, not lacking anything.

Now, we have to be careful here. James didn't have in mind completeness or lacking nothing in the sense that we can reach moral perfection in this life. We know from passages like 1 John 1:8 that, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But James did have in mind that we'd continue to grow in obedience to God, and, at the judgment to come when Christ returns, we'd have nothing lacking in our lives that would disqualify us.

After offering guidance with regard to testing, perseverance and maturity, James indicated that, at the end of this process, there would be a great reward.

## **Reward**

He mentioned this reward in 1:12 when he said:

**Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).**

As James explained here, everyone who perseveres under trial will have stood the test. And they will receive the crown of life, the crown of eternal life in the glorious kingdom of God that [the Lord] has promised to those who love him. In bringing all of these perspectives together, James offered his audience penetrating, reflective wisdom. He gave them guidance for understanding the trials they faced. In reality, every trial was a gift from God, designed for their eternal good.

**One of the things that James talks about from the beginning of the letter, and that theme occurs throughout, is the importance of**

enduring in suffering. And that's really what he talks about leads to Christian maturity. In the beginning of chapter 1 he says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds." And then he describes why: "Because you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance." And then he goes on: "Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." And so, we might think that suffering is a sign that God is not with us, but James looks at suffering as a sign that God is going to work, not just in spite of our suffering, but through our suffering to make us who he wants us to be. And that's where we really grow in maturity. He goes on to say, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because having stood the test" — this is in verse 12 of chapter 1 — "that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him." And so he gives us a different paradigm for thinking about suffering. It's actually something that shouldn't be avoided, not sought out, but in our culture we think of success as avoiding suffering, but here he describes it as an opportunity to grow. It's a crucible for Christian maturity being worked out.

— Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

James' focus on reflective wisdom addressed his audience's need in their trying circumstances. It also offered them guidance. But now, let's turn to how the path of reflective wisdom required faith.

## FAITH

When you think about it, the insights James gave his audience into their trials were common Christian teachings. But we all know that when troubles come into our lives, we can become so overwhelmed that we find it hard to hold onto even the most basic Christian beliefs. And apparently James feared that this was true for his audience. So, he immediately indicated that embracing the insights that he'd just offered them required them to turn in faith toward God. In James 1:5 we read these words:

**If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).**

James knew that if we want wisdom to understand God's often-hidden purposes in trials, we must "ask God" for it. But following this, in 1:6-8, James also connected prayer for wisdom with *faith* when he said:

**But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts ... must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (James 1:6-8, ESV).**

As we see here, James urged that prayers for wisdom must be in faith. Otherwise we will be double-minded people.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians have misunderstood James' instructions to ask in faith and not to be double-minded. They think that James referred to having confidence in particular prayer requests we make. All too often, Christ's followers believe that if we simply have enough faith, God will answer our prayers in the way we desire. But this isn't what James had in mind. For James, to ask "in faith" meant to be "faithful to God." We know this because James described the opposite of asking "in faith" as being "double-minded." And for James, to be double-minded was to be in serious rebellion against God. Listen to 4:8-9 and the way James spoke of the double-minded:

**Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom (James 4:8-9).**

Notice here that double-minded people are not merely those who fail to have confidence when they pray. They are sinners who must purify their hearts. Their infidelity is so serious that mourning and gloom are appropriate for them.

So, in the context of James' letter, he didn't have in mind someone who merely lacks confidence that God will answer a prayer. He had in mind a fundamental denial of the goodness of God. Apparently, some in James' audience blamed God for their failures. They reasoned that God had sent their trials, so God must be evil because he was tempting them to sin. This type of flagrant rebellion against God was what James referred to as being "double-minded." Listen to 1:13-14 where James addressed this serious misconception:

**Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (James 1:13-14, ESV).**

It's important to note that the Greek term translated "tempted" here is the verb *peirazō* (πειράζω), the terminology translated "trials" in 1:2. But James insisted that [God] himself tempts no one. This translation rightly reflects the intensive use of the Greek pronoun *autós* (αὐτός) or "himself." It does not simply say that God "tempts" — or tests — "no one." It literally says, "[God] *himself* tempts no one."

As we learn from the first chapters of the book of Job, God is in control of all trials, tests and temptations. But, in the drama of the heavenly court, it becomes clear that God's purpose for Job's trial was for Job's good, not for his harm. Satan, not God, used Job's trial to tempt him to sin.



So, to pray for wisdom in faith and not be double-minded is to affirm one of the most basic of all biblical teachings: the goodness of God. We must not doubt the goodness of God as we seek wisdom from him in trying circumstances. Otherwise, we have no reason to believe that God will give us wisdom. As James put it in 1:17:

**Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17, ESV).**

God is “the Father of lights.” He only gives “good” and “perfect” gifts. So, his purpose for our trials is always good and perfect. This must be our firm commitment of faith as we pursue the path of reflective wisdom.

In our study of the two paths of wisdom found in James, we’ve considered James’ focus on reflective wisdom. Now we’re in a position to move to our second main topic: practical wisdom. What does this New Testament book have to say about putting wisdom into practice?

## **PRACTICAL WISDOM**

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At one time or another we’ve all met people who are very knowledgeable. They impress everyone with how many things they know that others don’t. But sometimes, these same people don’t know much about practical life. They don’t know how to put their insights into right actions and attitudes. In many ways, James addressed this problem in his book. As we’ve seen, he opened his epistle with an emphasis on *reflective* wisdom. He knew how important it is to have insights into God’s hidden purposes for the trials that we face. But he also stressed *practical* wisdom — the ability to put this knowledge into the kinds of actions and attitudes that please God.

For the sake of simplicity, we’ll deal with practical wisdom in ways that parallel our earlier discussion. First, we’ll see the need for practical wisdom. Second, we’ll note how James gave his audience guidance. And third, we’ll look into the relationship between faith and practice. Let’s look first at how James stressed his audience’s need for practical wisdom.

### **NEED**

As we saw earlier, James only used the terms “wisdom” and “wise” in two contexts. The first of these is in 1:2-18 where James emphasized reflective wisdom. The second is in 3:13-18 where James emphasized the need for putting wisdom into practice.

**James is a very practical letter, and he’s really wanting to make sure that people put into practice what they believe. Where does he get this from? Well, again I think the answer is Jesus himself. I mean, Jesus**

himself had told parables about building house on sand or on rock, and the determining factor is, “Are you doing what I’ve commanded you? Are you putting into practice what I’m teaching?” That’s what Jesus was looking for. He was looking for people doing what they believe, putting it into practice. He also warned against the Pharisees, you know, “Be careful to do what they say but not imitate what they do because they don’t practice what they preach.” So, Jesus had been very hot on this issue of putting things into practice, and I think, therefore, James, in one sense, is just imitating his brother, Jesus, in saying this is really important. Perhaps there’s a second reason, again, that we can conjecture from the early church, and that is that maybe James had already begun to see how damaging it is to Christian witness when some of the Jewish Christians in his congregation were not actually showing the life of Jesus. You know, they had these great doctrines about Jesus, but they weren’t actually living it out, and the criticism may have come in, “You don’t practice what you preach,” and that would give the Christian message a bad name... Jesus himself said, “Be ye perfect,” and James repeats that teaching. He wants people to put things into practice, and that’s the emphasis we see.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Listen to 3:13 and the way James introduced the basic principles of practical wisdom:

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom (James 3:13).**

When we remember that many in James’ audience were Jewish believers familiar with the Old Testament, it’s not difficult to understand why at least some of them claimed to be “wise and understanding.” But James insisted that if this claim was genuine they would “show it by their good life.” In other words, they needed *practical* wisdom. Under the influence of Old Testament teaching — especially the book of Proverbs — James knew that wisdom was far more than deeply penetrating theological insights.

Those who had wholeheartedly embraced understanding from God would live a “good life” that “comes from wisdom.” But James also pointed out that this good life involves “deeds,” or “works,” as it may be translated. And it entails certain attitudes, like “humility.” As we’ll see, right actions and attitudes are both essential to practical wisdom.

To explain the need for practical wisdom further, James contrasted two types of practical wisdom that we mentioned in the beginning of this lesson. He first referred to earthly wisdom. And then, he spoke of heavenly wisdom. Let’s look first at earthly wisdom.

## Earthly Wisdom

In 3:14-16, we find this description of earthly wisdom:

**If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:14-16).**

As we saw in the first half of this lesson, James was deeply concerned with the turmoil between poor and wealthy believers in the church. And in 3:14, he brought up the fact that many in the churches “harbor[ed] bitter envy and selfish ambition in [their] hearts.” And according to verse 15, at least some of them had justified their practices by calling it “wisdom.” But James warned them not to boast about what they were doing or to deny the truth that he was about to explain to them.

Many modern Christians have difficulty grasping why James was so deeply concerned about the conflict between the poor and the wealthy in the early church. The church today continues to have poor and wealthy believers, especially when we compare Christians in different countries. But in the modern world, local congregations tend to be much more socially homogeneous than they were in the first century. Wealthy Christians tend to go to church with others who are wealthy, and poor Christians tend to go to church with others who are poor. But imagine if your own local church had extreme poverty and extreme wealth within it. How much friction would it create? Some believers would come to church in rags, not knowing where their next meal was coming from, while others would sit in the same room dressed in expensive clothes, with their pockets full of money. If this were the case in your local church, your church would be in turmoil.

The conflicts between the poor and the rich in James’ day were causing great damage in the churches he addressed. Apparently, the poor felt perfectly justified, even wise, in their envy of the wealthy. They knew Old Testament proverbs that instructed the rich to be generous to the poor. So, their Christian brothers and sisters should share what they had with them. And the wealthy felt perfectly justified, even wise, in being selfish. They could quote Old Testament proverbs that blamed poverty on sloth and explained wealth as the reward of hard work.

But James pointed out that this kind of wisdom was much worse than simply being mistaken or misguided. It was earthly, unspiritual, or natural, and demonic. And the evidence of this demonic origin was unmistakable. It had led to disorder and every kind of evil practice within the church.

**I think everyone is familiar with people who consider themselves wise in their own eyes, and that wisdom is often marked by arrogance, a hostile nature, a desire to be a contrarian. And James says that’s not the wisdom of God. As a matter of fact, that kind of wisdom, that worldly wisdom, or what he calls wisdom from below, is actually not merely dangerous or useless — he actually calls it “demonic.”**

**Whereas, wisdom from God is a wisdom that springs out of the fear of the Lord, and as a result, it is marked by humility; it's marked by compassion; it's marked by faithfulness to the Lord, as one who recognizes that the wisdom is not their own production, but rather it's the production of God himself who has given it to them generously, as James says. That's the kind of wisdom that Christians, that followers of Jesus Christ, the great wise sage — the sage greater than Solomon — that's the kind of wisdom that his followers are supposed to express in their lives.**

**— Dr. Scott Redd**

In the end, rather than furthering the work of God, the body of Christ had become divided, at war with itself. The congregations to whom James wrote had fallen prey to the demons who sought more than anything else to destroy the work of God. And it was this destruction that drove James to insist that his audience needed practical wisdom. After dealing with the need for practical wisdom by rejecting destructive, earthly wisdom, James turned immediately to the alternative, what he called heavenly wisdom.

## **Heavenly Wisdom**

In 3:17, James described this positive heavenly wisdom:

**But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:17).**

Here we see that James had in mind wisdom from heaven, meaning wisdom that comes from God. This wisdom is peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. In other words, wisdom from heaven doesn't falsely justify envy and selfish ambition, neither in the poor nor in the wealthy. True wisdom from God promotes a love for peace. And God's people demonstrate this peace by being considerate of others, submissive to others, and merciful. They bear good fruit and don't show partiality to one group or another. And all of these actions and attitudes rise from a sincere devotion to Christ.

**The wisdom from above, which comes from God — because it's above — of course, is a reflection of God's own attributes. James says that it's pure, it's peaceful, it is gentle, it's full of good fruits, it's merciful, and it is unwavering, and it is sincere, or un-hypocritical in other words, which of course are attributes that describe Jesus. Jesus was those things. And James says those are the sorts of things — they won't get you ahead in life, they won't make you successful, they won't mean you'll live in a bigger house, but it does result in, James**

**says, righteousness and peace; in other words, real shalom, real peace. And it's interesting that everybody really wants shalom, wholeness, fullness, peace. They want those things, and they think that it's the earthly wisdom that will get it for them, but actually that kind of peace-result only comes from the wisdom that is above, that doesn't seek one's own advancement, but, James says in verse 13 of chapter 3, that it is characterized by meekness, humility, not seeking one's own advancement, but rather the health and the wellbeing of others.**

**— Dr. Dan McCartney**

In 3:18, James referred his audience to what was most likely a well-known proverb:

**Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness (James 3:18).**

Much like Jesus blessed peacemakers in Matthew 5:9, James made it clear that the poor and rich in the church would receive a great reward for their righteousness — if they became those who make peace in the church.

Now that we've looked at practical wisdom and seen the need that motivated James to spend so much of his epistle on this subject, we should turn to the guidance he gave his audience for how they should put God's wisdom into practice.

## **GUIDANCE**

It's common for Christ's followers to talk a lot about the need for practical theology. We want sermons that are practical. We want lessons that tell us how to live. And in many parts of the world, there are reliable materials available that give us guidance for nearly every area of life. But the book of James reminds us of standards and priorities that are often forgotten as we pursue wisdom for our daily lives.

The epistle of James has a lot of specific things to say about guidance for practical living. But, we'll limit ourselves to just two considerations. First, we'll note how James upheld the standard of God's law. And second, we'll see that James promoted certain priorities of God's law. Let's look first at the standard of God's law.

### **Standard of God's Law**

Most modern Christians are aware of cautions that the New Testament raises about God's Old Testament Law. For one, we know that salvation is by grace, through faith, and not by works. And we rightly follow the emphasis of Paul in books like Galatians by standing against every attempt to earn salvation through obedience to the law.

Additionally, we know that we mustn't apply God's law as if we were still living in the days of the Old Testament. We rightly follow the emphases of books like Hebrews and apply God's law in ways Christ and his apostles and prophets taught us to apply it in the New Testament age.

Now, as important as these cautions are, we don't find them in James' epistle. Instead, James referred to the law of God in very positive terms. He emphasized what traditionally has been called the "third use of the law." We follow the law as an expression of our gratitude for the mercies God has shown us in Christ.

***Law that Gives Freedom.*** James' offered two descriptions of the law of God that are unique to his epistle. In the first place, he called it, the law that gives freedom.

James spoke of the law giving freedom in 1:25 and 2:12. There he said that the law sets us free from bondage to sin and its devastating effects. When we follow the law out of gratitude to God, it actually gives us freedom. Jesus referred to this same outlook in John 8:32 where he said:

**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).**

In Romans 7:7-13, Paul described the law as something sin uses to quicken evil desires within us to make us slaves of sin. But when James called the law, the "law that gives freedom," he described how the Spirit of God uses the law in a positive way as our authoritative guide for practical wisdom.

As we've seen, many of James' readers were entangled in webs of sin that were harming the church and leaving them discouraged. And, as long as they continued to follow their own ideas of wisdom, they were unable to escape the frustrations, troubles and harm sin brought to their lives. But just as God's word first set them free from the penalty and tyranny of sin, the word of God also charted a course for practical daily life that would set them free from the turmoil and discouragements of sin.

**The law certainly guides, chastises, corrects — right? — the believer's life and tries to bring it back into harmony with God's will. And yet, ultimately, also though, I think that's why James called it the law of liberty, of freedom, and that we will be judged by the law of freedom. I take that to mean the freedom that Christ has given us, and so, therefore, we are to live and deal with one another. We are to be judged by that law in which God shows no partiality and gives his grace freely, and so, we are to give that same grace and impartiality to one another, rich and poor, old and young, slave and free, male and female, just as St. Paul actually says.**

**— Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs**

This is why James insisted in 1:22-25:

**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says... Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom,**

**and continues in it — not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it — they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:22-25).**

**Royal Law.** In addition to speaking of God's law as the law that gives freedom, James also referred to God's law positively as the royal law.

James called the law "the royal law" in 2:8. This terminology drew attention to a point of view on God's commands that appears throughout the Old and New Testaments. God's law was his royal decree. It came from the Supreme Ruler to his people as the citizens of his kingdom.

Now, in the modern world we often have difficulty understanding the significance of this royal imagery. Few of us live in nations with powerful kings ruling over them. But James' audience lived under the authority of the Roman Emperor. They knew what it meant to call God's law, "the royal law." Put simply, they knew that God's law is not something to be taken lightly. It's not something that we can take or leave as we wish. It comes from the divine King of the universe. And as such, every part of it has absolute authority over us.

Listen to a portion of 2:8-10 and the way James elaborated on the authority of God's royal law:

**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture ... you are doing right... For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:8-10).**

Many, if not most, of James' Jewish-Christian audience understood that God's law was important. But as we see here, they'd submitted themselves to the law selectively. They'd kept some portions of it and ignored other parts. So, James reminded them that the law is "the royal law found in Scripture." It came from their divine King. And for this reason, "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

It was unacceptable to ancient human kings for their citizens to keep only the laws of the land *they* found convenient or pleasant. And in the same way, it was unacceptable for followers of Christ to keep only the laws of God's kingdom that they found convenient or pleasant. Ancient human kings treated such selectivity as rebellion against their royal authority. And God considered such selectivity as rebellion against his royal authority. The law of God is the standard of practical wisdom, and it will bring freedom to all who sincerely seek to obey all of its royal precepts.

Now that we've seen how James insisted that guidance for practical wisdom is found in the standard of God's law, we should turn to the ways he emphasized certain priorities of God's law.

## **Priorities of God's Law**

Let's face it, whenever Christians speak of keeping *all* of the commandments God has given us, we run into a very practical problem. There are just too many

commandments to remember, much less obey them all. So, by the limits of our finiteness, we're forced to concentrate on just this one or that one. And, of course, then it becomes easy to fall into the trap of disregarding the authority of God's word by focusing only on those parts of the Scriptures that we want to obey. To avoid this problem, we need to recognize the priorities that the law itself gives us. And we must always give priority to the more important dimensions of God's law.

You'll recall that Jesus dealt with the priorities of God's law in Matthew 22:34-40. In these verses, he identified the two greatest commandments. He declared, in no uncertain terms, that the command to love God, from Deuteronomy 6:5, was the most important principle to keep in mind. And he identified love for our neighbor, from Leviticus 19:18, as the second most important principle.

The apostle Paul clearly understood that love for God was the greatest commandment. But in Galatians 5:14, he also said that the whole law is fulfilled in the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Interestingly enough, James did the same. Listen to the rest of 2:8-10 and James' particular emphasis on the second greatest commandment:

**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:8-10).**

Notice here how James summarized the priorities of the royal law in the words of Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

It's no mystery why James did this. The turmoil between poor and wealthy believers in the church resulted from their oversight of this second greatest commandment.

As James noted here, those who "show favoritism" for the rich are "convicted by the law as lawbreakers." And this is no small matter. Everyone who ignores just this one law while keeping the others "is guilty of breaking all of [the law]." So, the law of God, the authoritative guide for practical wisdom, gives top priority to our love for each other, second only to loving God with all of our hearts. As James reminded the wealthy in 1:27:

**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27).**

**So, what's the test of true religion? Well, not that you do good things that are moral, that make you look good in society, but the real test is following God's ways — God cares for the orphan; God cares for the widow — when nobody's looking, when you get nothing back. Who's an orphan? Who's a widow? It's a person who can't give back to you. So, an act of kindness to your neighbor or to your boss doesn't count as a proof of true religion. But, you know, God loves the poor; God**



**cares for the weakest of the weak and doesn't receive anything back in return materially for himself. He receives our praise, of course, and takes pleasure in the good that we do. But caring for those who can't give back, that's a huge test.**

— Dr. Dan Doriani

James emphasized the need for the wealthy to follow the priorities of God's law by loving their poor neighbors. But love for neighbor was of such importance for practical wisdom that James emphasized how it also applied to the poor. To mention just a few examples, throughout his epistle, James made it clear that loving our neighbors means to use our tongues as instruments of blessing.

In 1:19, James called people to "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" with each other. In 4:1-3 James insisted that fights, quarrels and slander should not exist among God's people. In 4:11 he condemned "slander." And in 5:9 James ordered, "Don't grumble against each other." Instead, according to 5:16, they were to "confess [their] sins to each other and pray for each other."

If believers in James' audience wanted to show that they had wisdom from heaven, they would devote themselves to the standard of God's law. And they would do this fully recognizing the priority God's law placed on their love for each other.

Now that we've seen how James' emphasis on practical wisdom addressed his audience's need and offered guidance, let's look at a third major issue he raised: the relationship between faith and practical wisdom.

## **FAITH**

If there is one thing that is at the center of Christianity, it would have to be faith. We speak of Christianity as "our faith." We speak of Christ as the object of our faith. We affirm the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Fide* or justification by faith alone. The prominence of faith that we recognize today is rooted in the centrality of faith in the New Testament itself. Faith was also at the center of first century Christianity. And for this reason, to impress the importance of practical wisdom for his audience, James raised the issue of faith.

Time will only permit us to mention two ways in which James connected practical wisdom and faith. First, James explained the relationship between faith and works; and second, James explained the relationship between faith and justification. Let's look first at how he treated faith and works.

## **Faith and Works**

James began his discussion in 2:14 with a straightforward question:

**What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? (James 2:14).**

And of course, the answer to James question was, “No.” Faith that is not accompanied by deeds cannot save.

“Faith” or “believing” translates the Greek noun *pistis* (πίστις) and the verb *pisteuō* (πιστεύω). This family of words appears hundreds of times in the New Testament. But much like “faith” and “believing” in English, these words signified a number of different concepts.

To mention just a few, sometimes in the New Testament, faith and believing referred to mere intellectual agreement that something is true. At times, they referred to temporary endorsement. And at other times, they referred to what theologians often call “saving faith.” Saving faith is a wholehearted, life-long trust and reliance on Christ as the way of salvation. James acknowledged that “faith” and “believing” can mean many things. And, because of this, he called for his audience to examine the kind of faith they had. For instance, in 2:19, James challenged his Jewish-Christian audience with these words:

**You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder (James 2:19).**

When James conceded that his audience believed — from the verb *pisteuō* (πιστεύω) — that there is one God, he alluded to what’s called the *Shema*. This ancient Old Testament confession of faith, in Deuteronomy 6:4, tells us, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” From James’ point of view, it was good that his audience gave intellectual assent to this fact. But as good as this was, this kind of belief or faith would not suffice because “even the demons believe that.” In fact, the demons shudder in fear when they think about it. But it does them no good. Mere intellectual agreement without obedience isn’t saving faith. Or as James expressed succinctly in 2:26:

**As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (James 2:26).**

With this basic concept of faith and works in mind, we should also mention James’ treatment of faith and justification.

## **Faith and Justification**

The question of who was justified, or righteous before God, was a matter of some controversy among Jewish teachers in James’ time. And it continued to be a central issue within the first century Christian church as well. Who is counted as justified? Who is considered righteous? In 2:21-24, James answered these questions in this way:

**Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ... You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:21-24, ESV).**

Here James spoke of being justified, using the Greek verb *dikaioō* (δικαίω), which means “to declare righteous,” “to justify,” or “to vindicate.” He argued that Abraham was justified or vindicated as righteous by works, the work of offering his son Isaac to God in Genesis 22. And on this basis, he concluded that no one is justified or vindicated by faith alone. Everyone that God accepts as righteous is justified by works.

James’ statement has raised all kinds of controversy through the centuries primarily because it appears to contradict what the apostle Paul taught about justification. In 2:24 James said:

**A person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24, ESV).**

By contrast, the apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 2:16:

**A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16).**

In reality, there is no contradiction here. Rather, James and Paul used the same term *dikaioō* (δικαίω), or “justified”, in two different ways. In Paul’s technical theological vocabulary, he usually reserved the word “justified” for only one thing. For Paul, “justification” referred to the initial declaration of righteousness for all who have saving faith in Christ through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

James, however, spoke of justification in a different way. James used the term *dikaioō* (δικαίω) to mean something like “proven to be right” or “vindicated.” He didn’t deny that there is an initial imputation of Christ’s righteousness when a person first exercises saving faith. But, for James, the term *dikaioō* applied to a person who has professed faith in the Lord Jesus and is “proven to be right”, or is “vindicated” by the work of the Spirit in his or her life. From James’ point of view, the Spirit’s empowerment leads to faithful devotion to Christ. No matter what a person may claim, if they don’t demonstrate their faith through good works, then in the end they will not be vindicated. So, James spoke of this relationship between faith and justification as a way to highlight the importance of practical wisdom for his readers.

**The seeming conflict between Paul and James on the issue of justification by faith alone is really the major issue, I think, in the book of James. It comes up... There’s probably been more ink that has been spilled over that particular issue than any other in the book. First of all I’d like to say that the Greek word *dikaioo* sometimes means “the act of justification,” which, if I were to make it as simple as I can, is that justification is basically two sides to the same coin. You have, on one side, you have forgiveness — God forgives us. That’s the subtraction side. On the other side you have an addition,**

which is the imputation of righteousness. And then there's that declaration of "you are justified in my sight." And so, by faith we are justified, and that's one use of the word justification. On the other hand, we can use justification to mean "to vindicate" or "to be shown to be righteous." And so Paul is using it in the forensic way, and then we also have James using it in the sense of a works example, a showing to be righteous, in other words... So, if we were to summarize, it would be, Paul's use of justification is the priority of faith, and James' way of looking at justification is post-conversion or the proof of faith... So, James' question is, "Who should be considered righteous? One who says he believes in God or one who lives a life based on his profession and his belief in God?" And for James and Paul, faith must work. Can I say it again? Faith must work. It must produce. It must be visible. Verbal faith is not enough. Mental faith is insufficient. Faith must move into action. It endures trials, it obeys God's word, it produces doers, it harbors no prejudice, it controls the tongue, it acts wisely, it provides the power to resist the devil, and here, the most important, it waits patiently for the coming of the Lord. And both James and Paul taught exactly the same thing.

— Dr. Larry J. Waters

Listen to the way James applied this principle in 2:15-17:

**Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:15-17).**

It would be difficult to imagine James making his point more forcefully than this. His audience needed to address the turmoil in their churches by practical obedience to the law of God, especially the command to love each other. No matter what claims they made about their faith, they would not be vindicated as righteous in the eyes of God without the practical good works of love.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we've looked at two paths of wisdom in the book of James. We've seen how James pointed his audience toward reflective wisdom by highlighting their need for reflective wisdom, offering guidance, and making the connection between reflective wisdom and faith. And we've also looked at how James directed his audience to pursue

practical wisdom by showing them their need and guiding them to apply God's truth in faithful, humble service to God and to his people.

James called on first century Jewish Christians to follow two paths of wisdom. And the same must be true for you and me today. We also need both reflective and practical wisdom. To receive these gifts from God, we must submit ourselves to the guidance James offered. And we must ensure that we do so in full faith and devotion to God. In a time when we easily follow the way of earthly wisdom, we must take the book of James to heart and follow the paths of wisdom that come from God.

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# The Epistle of James

LESSON  
TWO

## Two Paths of Wisdom Faculty Forum



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## Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	What is wisdom?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	Why does James give so much emphasis to the challenges facing poor believers? .....	2
<b>Question 3:</b>	What can we learn from James about the need to grow in Christian maturity? .....	5
<b>Question 4:</b>	Why does James need to remind his audience to put what they've been taught into practice? .....	7
<b>Question 5:</b>	Why does James differentiate between two types of wisdom?.....	9
<b>Question 6:</b>	What is the relationship between wisdom and righteousness? .....	11
<b>Question 7:</b>	What is James' understanding of the uses and function of the law in the life of the believer? .....	13
<b>Question 8:</b>	What is the relationship between faith and works in the Christian life? .....	16
<b>Question 9:</b>	What are some common ways that contemporary interpreters misunderstand the relationship between faith and justification in the epistle of James? .....	16
<b>Question 10:</b>	In what ways did James and Paul complement each other when they discussed faith and justification in their letters? .....	18

# The Epistle of James

## Lesson Two: Two Paths of Wisdom

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Jimmy Agan  
Dr. Stephen J. Bramer  
Dr. David W. Chapman  
Rev. Larry Cockrell  
Dr. Brandon D. Crowe  
Dr. Dan Doriani

Rev. Clete Hux  
Dr. Thomas L. Keene  
Rev. David Lewis  
Dr. Dan McCartney  
Dr. Ryan O’Leary  
Dr. Imad Shehadeh

Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong  
Dr. Daniel Treier  
Dr. Eric J. Tully  
Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

### Question 1: What is wisdom?

#### Dr. Daniel Treier

Wisdom is the growing capacity to run with, rather than against, the grain of God’s created order. Sometimes the vocabulary is used in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, for something that’s merely a skill or perhaps for abstract philosophizing. But of course, that’s only going to run so far in terms of going with, rather than against, the grain of God’s creation. So, ultimately, wisdom begins where it ends, with the fear of the Lord. And it’s a growing capacity to live in light of the fear of the Lord. So, wisdom is both a *process* and a *product*. We have two ways — toward life or toward death. We’re to choose the way toward life and grow in our ability to walk in it in the right direction rather than choosing to go in a wayward direction and pursue folly. So, wisdom is communicated through tradition. The wisdom literature in the Old Testament provides us with memorable, punchy sayings that enable us to capture the best of what the community wants to pass on regarding how to live well. But wisdom involves not only tradition; it also involves inquiry. It involves ongoing reflection about how that tradition relates to present day circumstances and challenges. So, the traditional wisdom of Proverbs is balanced out by the more reflective and challenging wisdom of Job or Ecclesiastes. In the New Testament, of course, wisdom has a new dimension. It becomes more fully personal as it is embodied in Jesus Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is further democratized or spread around through the capacity we have to gain the mind of Christ by the Holy Spirit. All of God’s people can grow in wisdom rather than having wisdom be initially focused in a group of sages who are learning to teach others how to live well... The other emphasis in biblical wisdom comes in terms of virtue, and the way that moral and spiritual excellence is formed in community. Of course, ultimately our relationship to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is the center of how we gain wisdom, but Christ, by the Spirit, forms wisdom in his people as the people of God grow together in virtue over time.

**Dr. Eric J. Tully**

Well, when we think about the definition of wisdom in the Old Testament, we're interested in the ways that people act in ways that are skillful. So, in its most neutral sense, in its most basic sense, wisdom just simply means skill. It means doing something effectively, whether that's being a skillful carpenter and cutting wood to the correct dimensions, or whether it's being an effective stonemason and being able to cut blocks for a building to the correct dimensions. Wisdom means being skillful at something and often, the ways that we think about wisdom are ways in which we think about living life skillfully, knowing not only what to do but when to do it, knowing the proper social situation for something, living life in an effective way so that you get ahead, so that you prosper, so that you live the life that you want to live... Wisdom has a very practical orientation in the Bible. It's dealing with the kinds of things we run across all the time, whether it's relationships, dealing with authority, thinking about our use of money, thinking about relationship to our parents, in thinking about our job, and even table manners, all kinds of really practical issues like that. And then, in a broader way, wisdom is concerned with order, being able to understand life and the world correctly so that we can live skillfully. We know the kinds of pitfalls to avoid. We know the ways to get ahead in life. And it's the Bible that begins to help us understand that if we really want to live life skillfully, we have to do that in terms of the fear of the Lord. So that's where we really begin to move from the most basic sense of wisdom as being something that you're good at, even if it's wrong or neutral, to being something that is related to our relationship with the Lord and recognizing that he is the Creator of the entire world, and that if we are properly related to him, then that is what will help us to live life skillfully.

**Question 2:**

**Why does James give so much emphasis to the challenges facing poor believers?**

**Dr. Brandon D. Crowe**

James gives us very practical advice about how we are to live as Christ's community in this age, and one of the emphases of the book of James is having a concern for the poor. Why would James tell us that we should be concerned about the poor? Well, we should think back to the teaching of Jesus at this point and remember that when Jesus came, his message can be described as a gospel of good news for the poor. And in fact, when Jesus was explaining to the messengers of John the Baptist that the kingdom of God had been inaugurated, he reminds them that good news had been preached to the poor. Why is it that the poor are given such a prominent place in the preaching of the gospel? Well, it appears to be that the poor are paradigmatic heirs of the kingdom of God because they have nothing to rely on except God himself. And, in fact, if we look at the Old Testament precedence, we can see that even King David could describe himself as "poor" because he was relying on God and trusting in God for intervention and salvation, and he was not trusting in his own abilities or his own resources. And in the book of James, he reminds us of the teaching of Jesus that his

message is a gospel of the poor, and in chapter 2, he tells us that God has chosen the poor to be rich in the kingdom of God. What is the practical implication of this? The practical payoff is those of us in Christ's kingdom, who are a part of his church, should have particular care for those who are poor because we, first of all, want to have compassion on them as Christ tells us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, but also because the poor have a particularly important role to play in illustrating for us and for the world the nature of the kingdom, as we rely on God for salvation and not on our own resources for salvation. And so, the way we treat our brothers and sisters who may not have as much in the church, we should treat them with the utmost respect and not treat those who are wealthy, in the worldly terms, we should not treat them with more dignity or more respect than we do with the poor, because God has chosen the poor to be rich in the kingdom of God.

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

The book of James is a great aid for us in understanding just how important caring for the poor is in the heart of God. He equates genuine religion, or one of the marks of it, is our care for the poor. Such as here again in 1:27:

**Religion that ... our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:**

— and what we might think is, “doing these certain things” or “knowing these certain things” — the way he defines it is:

**to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27, NIV).**

Following a similar idea to Christ in Matthew 25, that the way that he recognizes those that are his, chosen before the foundation of time, is that they care for the sick and the poor and the prisoner and the orphan, and so on. And then, even in chapter 2, when he talks about favoritism, and then he goes into his famous description of faith versus deeds, the examples that he uses are care for the poor. That's how faith is expressed most genuinely, and how faith is seen is in care for the poor. It's not enough just to say that we care for the poor, that someone should do something about it. Faith is expressed in actually doing it. But in fact, he goes on and describes the poor as being those who are honored in the site of God in their state. We might look at the poor and think, oh, you know, they're cursed by God. But God says we look, and we should learn from the poor. Jesus doesn't say that it's harder for a poor man, or it's easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle than a poor man inherit the kingdom of God. He uses a rich man because that wealth can cause us to rely on ourselves. But one of the things the poor understand is their need for God. There's no pretense. And so, all of us can learn from that.

**Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation**

There's a very important question for any society that James deals with in his treatment of the poor, in the way that he aids our understanding of this theme. He candidly addresses this issue in a powerful way in chapter 2 of his epistle when he says:

**My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory (James 2:1).**

When we distinguish between people, there can be a lot of prejudice and hypocrisy. People treat some people gently and with honor, while others they treat with humiliation, contempt, and apathy. This is unacceptable in Christian life. And James gives an example about the poor by saying:

**For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place" [in this prestigious place] while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there" (James 2:2-3).**

Here we can see the hypocrisy, partiality, discrimination, perhaps racism. Sometimes we treat others according to their knowledge, their background or nationality, their age, gender, or financial or social position. James says this is not the way it should be in Christian life. Notice where the problem is. He puts his finger exactly on the issue by saying:

**[H]ave you not then made distinctions among yourselves [Have you not examined yourselves? Do you not see what you are doing?] and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:4).**

Discriminating between one another, unequal treatment of people, humiliating the poor, all come from evil thoughts. This indicates the depravity of the heart, and it also indicates something very dangerous, that our way of thinking is in opposition to God's. We think in one way, and God thinks in another way. Notice how James puts it:

**Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man (James 2:5-6).**

This is the way God thinks. He turns the standards of the world upside down. He puts down the mighty and exalts those who are lowly. So, when we discriminate against and humiliate the poor, we are responding in a way that is opposite to God's way. That is why James focuses strongly on this theme.

**Dr. Dan McCartney**

James is very concerned for the poor because, as James says in 2:5, they are the ones, the poor are the ones, who are rich in faith. God has chosen them to be rich in faith and to be inheritors of the kingdom. That's actually in the context of a deep concern that James has in the church or churches to whom he is writing, because apparently people were showing favoritism towards the rich people, which is a very common thing to do... There's just a natural instinct that people have to show favoritism towards the rich, and James says that's way out of character with God. And, in fact, that is a dishonoring of the poor. And if God actually favors and blesses the poor, then it's very strange, it's very out of character for somebody who claims faith in Christ, as he says in 2:1, to show favoritism. Now, that doesn't mean that simple economic poverty is an automatic ticket to eternal life. That's not what he's getting there. He's rather focusing on the fact that those who are poor both economically and in other ways disenfranchised or oppressed, they are much more likely to lay firmly hold of the kingdom of God because they don't have money or power that they could hold onto instead, and as a result, God favors the poor. He's the one who takes care of them, and therefore, those who are God's people must respect the poor because God does. And also, there's the dimension that any believer should know that he or she, himself or herself, is very poor and very needy when it comes to their relationship to God. So, it really is an insult to God himself to kowtow to a rich person and to disrespect the poor. If the poor are really important to God, they had better be important to us as well.

**Question 3:****What can we learn from James about the need to grow in Christian maturity?****Dr. Jimmy Agan**

James has so much to teach us about Christian maturity and Christian growth. One of the ways he's going to challenge many believers is to show us that doctrine and duty go hand in hand. Sometimes we emphasize belief in right doctrine, but we don't emphasize right practice as much. And James won't let us get away with that. He insists that we turn our belief into action. Another way that James helps us think about spiritual growth and maturity is he challenges a dichotomy between personal piety and care for others. And sometimes as believers we could say, "You know, as long as I'm walking with Jesus, as long as I'm growing with the Lord, and I'm reading Scripture, and I'm praying, then everything is good. I'm growing in holiness." And James wants to say, no, real holiness is going to go hand in hand with mercy toward those in need — the orphans, the widow, the poor. So, James is going to challenge us to a model of spiritual growth that's not just about us, but about others around us as well. And then, personally, I'd have to say the book of James challenges me to grow in holiness in the sense of seeing my need of God's mercy, because I see more clearly the depths of sin. If you want to know how serious sin is, read the book of James, because he's going to tell you things like this: If you break one of God's commandments, you've broken all of them. James is going to tell you it's a sin not

only to do what's wrong, but to know what's right and fail to do it. And James is going to tell you that if you speak negatively about a brother, you're actually criticizing God himself as the giver of his perfect law. And so, James has a radically serious view of sin, and therefore, he's exposing our need for God's grace and mercy, and it makes us just eat up the promise he gives us, that mercy triumphs over judgment.

**Dr. Dan McCartney**

James is very helpful in our growth into maturity for a number of reasons. He is very clear about how the life of the believer is one of commitment, which he underscores, for example, in 1:5-8. He shows how the life of the believer is growing in humility and meekness in many places — in James 1:9-11, and 2:1-4, and 3:13 and following, and most of chapter 4, and the later part of chapter 5. So, he's very deeply concerned with this aspect, something often missing from our life as believers. Thirdly, he points out the danger of anger and how anger does not work the righteousness of God... There's also the danger of a loose tongue that is something that mature Christians need to make sure that they have control of their tongue. James is concerned with patience in the midst of suffering, and there's a recognition by a mature Christian that suffering is part of life and especially the Christian life, and it's how one responds to suffering that determines one's growth in Christ, one's growth in knowledge of God. And above all, there's a general awareness of a dependence on God's mercy. Over and over again that mercy theme is in James, a recognition that our lives are very and constantly dependent on mercy. So faith, in James, which, as I mentioned, is a deep concern to James, is a commitment to be like Jesus, and Christian maturity is basically a growth in being like Jesus. And so, as we are like Jesus, in his mercy, in his showing of compassion, in his perseverance in the midst of suffering, that is the way in which James helps us time and time again in our growth in Christ.

**Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation**

What can we learn from James in regard to growing in Christian maturity and producing fruit in the Christian life? Well, James deals with real life. He's very practical. He's neither theoretical nor romantic. And James' point concerns everyone, regardless of who they are. His point is about how to respond to trials, how to *correctly* respond to trials. He simply says that in order to respond positively to trials, we need a special kind of wisdom, a wisdom that comes from God. So, when a trial comes, we should face it with wisdom without falling into sin or iniquity because of it. Then, as we conquer the trial, we become better and stronger instead of allowing the trial to defeat us and make us worse. He says this happens first through prayer, prayer that does not doubt God, his attributes, his ability, his benevolence, his love, and his goodness. James speaks about asking God for wisdom, asking with confidence and faith in God. So, he first addresses prayer, then he mentions Scripture. He says, "[B]e quick to hear" — run to hear — "slow to speak." ... Let us listen to what God is saying. Do not rush! Instead of responding angrily to trials, let us calm down and listen to the Word speaking to us. We need wisdom when trials come, but where do we get wisdom? Prayer is an up arrow and Scripture is a down arrow in which God speaks to us. I speak with him, and he speaks with me.

**Question 4:****Why does James need to remind his audience to put what they've been taught into practice?****Dr. Stephen J. Bramer**

I can think of a number of reasons that James needs to encourage his audience, his readership, to put into practice what they've been taught... James grew up in the first century in Palestine, and he would have been aware that there were many, many teachers at the time who were hypocritical in what they taught and then how they acted. His brother, Jesus Christ, pointed that out numerous times to the Pharisees, and so James is well aware that you could be a religious person, be teaching things or being taught things, and not necessarily practicing them. I also think that James was well aware of his own personal experience. We don't know how much he heard his brother teach, but from James, he quotes from the material that we later find in the Sermon on the Mount quite a bit, so I think he heard his brother teach. So, he'd been taught, but he hadn't responded in faith or in action to that until after the resurrection. So, he knew from personal experience, you could have a head knowledge and not necessarily, then, be putting it into practice. And I assume that James, as a good teacher of the church, observed people's personal reaction to the teaching that was occurring in the church, and recognizing sometimes the hardness of the human heart, sometimes just the inability of humans to remember what they've been taught and act on it, being a little inconsistent, that he felt it was important to remind them that it wasn't enough to have just heard it or even to have learnt it, but then to take that and to put it into practice.

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

One of the themes of the whole book of James is, faith is seen in what we do in response. In 1:22:

**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves. Do what it says.**

And then he gives this great analogy:

**Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it — not forgetting what they've heard but doing it — they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:22-25).**

And the way he describes the law there, and even doing the law, is that it's a law of freedom, and we need to continue in that law. We might think that following the law or doing the word is a form of slavery, but the way he describes it is that's where freedom is really found, so that we're not enslaved by other things. And it's not enough just to know about the word or what the word says. Again, an indicator of



what's really in our hearts is whether we do the word or not. If it's just in our heads, then it hasn't sunk down far enough. It has to be seen in what we do.

**Rev. David Lewis**

There are several important reasons why James needs to exhort Christians to live out their life and to take what Jesus has taught and to put it into practice in their real lives. And one of these reasons, a very practical reason that all believers have to deal with, is even though I have been declared righteous by God, and I've received the Holy Spirit, and I've been called to be one of God's people, I still struggle with sin. And this is a part of our life and our reality, until Jesus comes again, until the resurrection of the dead on the last day, is I must struggle with sin, and so I need to be exhorted. I need to be reminded of what God wants me to do. And so, this is a very important point that every Christian in this age needs to deal with. It's good that James and Paul and Jesus and the other apostles exhort us to live a certain way, because we struggle with sin, and we need to be reminded of this.

Another reason is, something many of us may forget about, but those who are new to the faith, who have accepted the gospel that Jesus has come to save them from sin, death, the power of Satan, they believe in him, they're now incorporated into the people of God, they may not know the very next day what it is God wants them to do. And so, in the New Testament we find the apostles and James and the other writers exhorting Christians to live a certain way. It could well be because many of them don't know what is a God-pleasing life. Yeah, we've got the law written on our heart, but that's not always so clear, so to hear externally God's chosen teachers telling us how we should respond, that's of great value... There are certain things that show that you're a Christian. The law itself has a value, especially when it tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and so James is actually addressing a problem that I think has peaked up in the history of the church repeatedly, and it's out there in Christianity today, this idea of "cheap grace," gospel reductionism — "the only thing that's true is the message of salvation, so I can dismiss any of the moral demands of God that I find uncomfortable at this moment." And to this, James is saying, "Absolutely not." This is one of the main contributions of this book in the New Testament, is he's the guy who forcefully says to a cheap-grace understanding of the gospel, "No way, this is not what Christianity is about."

**Dr. Dan McCartney**

James regards it as rather indispensable to genuine faith that that faith be put into practice. There is a poisonous toxin that has always been in the church of what one author called "easy believism," that is, this notion that if you somehow just think that certain doctrines are true, or if you follow certain formulas, or utter certain liturgies, and at the end of the day your ethical life doesn't matter. That's not a genuine faith at all, and in fact will result in condemnation despite your conforming to certain ideas or your giving assent to certain thoughts. Jesus actually attacks that same thing. He lays it in pretty hard on the Pharisees for being hypocrites. A hypocrite is somebody who is pretending to hold to certain things, but it doesn't actually affect his life. And it's worth remembering that most hypocrites do not know that they are hypocrites... They

have somehow deceived themselves — and by the way, self-deceit is another very interesting thing that James talks about — but hypocrites have deceived themselves into thinking that they are believers, when actually they aren't. The key, James says, is whether you actually act out that faith in what you do. A genuine faith, says James over and over again in chapter 2, is active. It's not something that just nods the head then goes to sleep. In fact, acknowledging certain things to be true is something that even demons do, James says, but what good does that do them because even though they "believe" in the sense of they acknowledge that there are certain things that are true, they're still demons. They're still under condemnation. And James even goes so far as to say that kind of faith is like a corpse. He uses the word that would be offensive to a Jewish reader and probably even Gentile readers in the same way that we kind of have an adverse reaction to a corpse; we wouldn't want to have anything to do with it. And that's what James says a faith that actually doesn't act out that faith is like. It's completely dead. It has no value whatsoever, in fact, it's repulsive.

### **Question 5:**

#### **Why does James differentiate between two types of wisdom?**

##### **Dr. Jimmy Agan**

In James 3, James mentions two different kinds of wisdom. One is earthly and unspiritual; that comes from the Devil. The other is heavenly; it comes from God, and it yields abundant fruit of peace and joy in the lives of the people who receive it. There's kind of a question as to why James might do that. Why contrast two different kinds of wisdom? And James is the Proverbs of the New Testament. In the book of Proverbs you don't get a contrast between the two kinds of wisdom. In Proverbs you get a contrast between wisdom and folly. So, that raises the question, why would James do this kind of interesting move to contrast two kinds of wisdom, and my hunch is this. In the book of Proverbs you have parents teaching children. You have a mature group teaching a group of people who know they're not as mature as the teachers. James, contrasting two kinds of wisdom, seems to be assuming an audience in which all his readers would want to be known as mature and wise. They would want to say, "Yes, we have wisdom." And James seems to be going with their argument and saying, "Okay, have it your way. You're all-wise, but some of you, you're getting your wisdom from the Devil. You're getting your wisdom from the wrong source, and you need to turn from that kind of wisdom to the kind of wisdom that can only come from God, the kind of wisdom that comes from heaven. And so then James shows, you know, this worldly wisdom that comes from the Devil, it manifests itself in your relationships. It's going to show up in all kinds of envy and discord and strife as you relate to other people. The wisdom that comes from God is going to do just the opposite. It's going to produce harmony and love and peace as you relate to other people. So, James contrasts these two kinds of wisdom and says, "You know what, everybody wants to be wise. Not everybody wants to reflect true wisdom in the way they treat other people." And so James is pointing us right back to this wisdom that comes from God that's going to have a powerful transforming impact on the way that we treat other people every day.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

James talks about two different kinds of wisdom in his book, which is often about wisdom, the book of James is, and when he speaks of wisdom, he speaks of a wisdom that is from above, that is a holy wisdom, that is wise and understanding. And he speaks of another wisdom, which he calls a wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, [and] demonic.” And when he describes that second kind of wisdom, he talks about a wisdom that is jealous and seeks its own self-ambition. And we can think of people in our lives who have a kind of earthly wisdom, a wisdom that has managed to help them succeed in life, a wisdom that’s enabled them to accomplish their ends and their ambitions and that’s accomplished their purposes, but often has injured other people in the process. And so, James contrasts that kind of wisdom with:

**The wisdom [that is] from above [that] is ... pure [and] peaceable [and] gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:17-18).**

And all of those things have a lot to do with our relationships with one another. And so, we see that this wisdom that’s from above is primarily one that’s oriented towards loving our neighbor and the royal law.

**Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

In chapter 3 of James, he differentiates between two types of wisdom. This is actually something wisdom teachers do. They compare things. They say, “This is what the life of the unrighteous looks like. This is what the life of the righteous looks like. This is the wicked. This is those who believe in God,” and they’ll do these kind of polar opposites to compare things. It’s a literary tool to make things clear, to impact his readers. Paul also, by the way, compares two types of wisdoms. He talks about wisdom from God, heavenly wisdom, which is foolishness to the Gentiles; it’s actually shameful to the Gentiles, a stumbling block to the Jews. So, he compares two types of wisdoms as well. He’s doing something different there. James in his focus is on conduct, okay? So, in James 3, he says this:

**Who is [the] wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom (James 3:13).**

And so, he uses that language of wisdom to talk about the way we conduct ourselves, our lifestyle. And in that section his focus is primarily upon not how you spend your private time, not how much Bible reading you do, but how you behave in social context. So, the wisdom that is from God is kind, it’s peaceable, it’s merciful, it doesn’t get bent out of shape when somebody treats you badly. But the wisdom that is demonic is always argumentative, quarrelsome, and it’s divisive. So, he’s really concerned there with how you behave in social context, how you behave at church, how you behave among the Gentiles, among the unbelievers. That’s his focus, and the reason he compares them along two angles is to show you the results of folly in your

relationships. What will folly do to your friendships, to your conduct, to your relationship with those around you?

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

I think James does a great job of pointing out the difference between “worldly wisdom” and wisdom that’s from God. I think there’s a temptation when we have a lot of education and knowledge to equate that with being wise. But the thing that he talks about here in chapter 3 is, really, you can recognize both kinds of wisdom, whether it’s worldly wisdom or godly wisdom, by the fruit of it. For example:

**Who is wise and understanding among you? ... But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic (James 3:13-15, NIV).**

But then he goes on in verse 17 to talk about the wisdom that comes from God, and again, it’s not measured so much by theological degrees or how big the words are that we use. He says it’s:

**... first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness (James 3:17-18, NIV).**

And so, keeping in line with James’ idea of “Be a doer of the word and not just a hearer,” is he applies that in wisdom, and he talks not just peace-knowing, but peace-making, taking that knowledge and applying it in relationship with other people. That’s where wisdom is really seen.

**Question 6:**

**What is the relationship between wisdom and righteousness?**

**Dr. Eric J. Tully**

In the Bible, there’s an important connection between wisdom and righteousness. That’s not true in other wisdom texts of the ancient Near East, whether they’re texts from Mesopotamia or texts from Egypt. These are practical sayings that have to do with having good table manners or responding correctly to the king or to someone that’s higher in authority. It’s very much about the kind of skillful living that you would expect to be present in a really practical text. But the specific contribution of the Bible is that if we truly want to be wise, if we want to think about life as it really is, then we have to consider God as the Creator of the world. It’s creation theology which really undergirds wisdom literature in the Old Testament. And that’s why it says in the book of Proverbs, and it says in Ecclesiastes, and it says it in the book of Job, that if you really want to be wise, you have to fear the Lord, because it’s the Lord who set up the world the way that it is. It’s his character and his value system

that is sort of built into the world, and therefore, the more that we are aware of that and the more that we live a life that is in correspondence to God's values, then the wiser we will be. So, it's not neutral. It's not just simply a matter of skill. It's a matter of skill that comes because we are relating our lives to God and to his values. Here's an example. In Proverbs 10:27-28, there's one example of this. It says in 10:27:

**The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short (Proverbs 10:27).**

And why would that be true? Why would that be true that the fear of the Lord prolongs life? Well, it's because as we fear the Lord and as we take on his value system and live our lives according to his value system, then we will be living a life that's in sync with the way that he made us to be, and therefore, we will not experience negative retribution, and instead we will be beneficiaries of his blessing. It says in the next verse, in 28:

**The hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish (Proverbs 10:28).**

Here you have this opposition in Proverbs between the righteous and the wicked. And so, if we want to be truly wise, then Proverbs would say that it's not just about being observant, it's not just about having a lot of brainpower, but it's about our faith. It's about living a life that corresponds to the way that God actually created us, and that means living righteously.

#### **Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation**

Wisdom is sure to encompass righteousness. If a man is wise, but he is not righteous, there must be some deception in his wisdom, some selfish desires, biases, or unrighteousness. So, for instance, when Solomon judged between two women who should have the child, he used wisdom to judge and the result was righteousness. He gave the answer from the perspective of truth. God's revelation tells us that these two — wisdom and righteousness — are not to be separated.

#### **Dr. Ryan O'Leary**

I think the relationship between wisdom and righteousness is that we need wisdom in order to live a righteous life. Wisdom is practical knowledge to please God, and righteousness is really living in a right relationship with God.

#### **Dr. Daniel Treier**

The relationship between wisdom and righteousness in Scripture involves partial overlap, not total identity. In the Old Testament there's a sense that wisdom does begin with the fear of the Lord, and it's obviously strongly associated with righteousness in the way that it helps us to have a growing capacity for living well in accordance with God's design. But there's also a sense in which even those who do not fear the Lord can avoid the most extreme examples of folly, particularly physical and spiritual adultery. They can avoid the kinds of basic traps that would simply

destroy their lives because God has communicated enough of his design for creation that people can recognize parts of it and live in partial relationship to it, or at least avoid self-destructive folly, even if they're not particularly righteous. In the New Testament, of course, Jesus Christ is not only wisdom for us, but our righteousness and holiness and redemption. So, there's a strong association again between wisdom and righteousness... One other point that might be worth making about wisdom and righteousness and how they relate is that much of biblical wisdom focuses on how we use our money and how we use our mouths. And those are aspects where wisdom particularly is manifested in righteous living in New Testament material such as the book of James.

### **Question 7:**

### **What is James' understanding of the uses and function of the law in the life of the believer?**

#### **Dr. Brandon D. Crowe**

One thing we see in the book of James is that the law has a continuing relevance in the Christian life. And even though James does not focus as much upon the work of Christ and what he has done to save us, he clearly believes in the work of God that comes outside of us and saves us from our sin. However, he emphasizes the imperative of how a Christian is to live in light of the coming of Christ. And when James teaches us about how we are to live, he does speak of the law. He might describe it as "the royal law," "the law of liberty," or "the perfect law." So we might ask, what law does he have in mind? I think it's helpful to think of the law in terms of the relationship of the Old Testament law to Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of the law, and when Christ came and spoke about his kingdom, he helpfully summarized the law for us in two main ways. First, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second great command from the law is we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. These come from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. And as Jesus told us these two great commands, what he was, in effect, doing was summarizing the law of God and showing us how we are to live in light of God's commands in the kingdom era that Christ himself had inaugurated. And when we come to the book of James, we see that Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. That is why the law is the perfect law. It is the royal law because it speaks of the kingdom of God, and it is a law of liberty because we do not save ourselves by keeping the law, but as Christ redeems us from the curse of the law, we are enabled to walk in God's commands... And so, the two great commands that Jesus gives us from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 as a summary of God's law in connection to God's kingdom that comes through Christ, these two texts are important for the exposition of James and are fully consistent with what Jesus told us when he told us to love the Lord our God above all and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

**Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

The use and the function of the law in the life of the believer is a really important question, and it's a little tough to answer with James, because the first kind of sub-question that comes to mind is, which law is he talking about? Is he talking about Torah, the first five books of the Bible? Is he talking about the Ten Commandments? It's not altogether clear, but he calls this law, throughout the book where he's talking about it, he calls it a "law of freedom," he calls it a "royal law." And what he seems to be indicating is that the law he's referring to, the law which is very useful for the life of the believer, is the law which comes from Christ. It is the law, the Old Testament law, fulfilled in the teachings and instructions of our Savior Jesus Christ. And so, the law is incredibly useful in that regard, but you have to be clear what we're talking about. We're not talking about the ceremonial circumstances of Israel. We're not talking about various rules and regulations. We're talking about the wisdom that Jesus is sending to his church. In this regard, it's really interesting, James seems to talk about the law in a similar way that Paul talks about the law of the Spirit, the law of the Spirit of life, the law of Christ. It is extremely powerful; it is useful. It's not just legal commands. It's, according to James, it's actually implanted in us. It is implanted — and we can say by the Spirit — in us and it flourishes and it cultivates in the life of the believer in such a way that it works out in daily practical ways in our life. So, what would James have us do with the law? He would have us consider the Old Testament, read it, study it, and study it particularly in light of the instructions that we have in Jesus Christ and the way in which we are to use those things for the life of the church.

**Rev. David Lewis**

James' primary understanding of the use and function of the law in the life of a believer is that the law is a guide for the believer in how to live their life in a way that pleases God and in a way that serves their neighbor and their fellow believers... We Lutherans like to distinguish three uses or functions of the law in the lives of believers. One function is that the law functions as a curb to keep sin in check. That would be sort of like your red light use of the law, your stop sign. If you didn't have red lights, people would be bashing into each other in the intersection. You need sort of a stop sign to keep people in check. The second use is the law as a mirror, shows us our sins. And the third use is the law as a rule and guide to the believer on how to lead a God-pleasing life. And this seems to be James' primary understanding of the role that the law plays, what I would call the third use, but basically the law tells believers how it is that they would lead a God-pleasing, faithful life in this time and place. And with this ... it's important to see what James actually understands the law to be. He refers once in chapter 2 to the "royal law." And the royal law is the command to love your neighbor as yourself. And so, it seems that for James, the law, in a sense, boils down to what Jesus calls the second greatest commandment in the Gospels: "Love your neighbor as yourself." You know, James seems to be reflecting his brother's teaching here, that if you want to understand what God really wants from you, his people, he wants you to love him with your whole heart, and he wants you to love your neighbor as yourself. And this, especially, becomes the rule and guide for the Christian in how they're supposed to treat their fellow believers and

their neighbors, and then this would come out in very practical ways. For instance, don't show favoritism to the rich over the poor. In fact, show concern for the poor. Help the widows and the orphans in their affliction. It would come out in very practical ways. Don't say things that are going to be destructive. Don't use your tongue to speak evil of your brothers or to curse people. And notice that all of this is sort of guided by what James calls the "royal law" — "Love your neighbor as yourself." And so, I think, for James to say "law," I think James is taking the entire Torah of Moses, and he's doing what our Lord did, what his brother did. What are the most important commands in this whole edifice of laws and commands? It's no longer something like circumcision or eating kosher or observing purity, it becomes love your neighbor as yourself. And James would argue this is a rule and guide for how Christians are to live out their faith, to conduct their lives in this time and place. And so, just to give James a bit of a break, he doesn't harp on the entire Torah of Moses. He basically focuses upon that one command that is one of the commands our Lord focuses upon and says, "If you want to live as God's people, this is what you take to heart."

**Dr. Dan McCartney**

The law functions in the life of the believer in several ways in James... James calls it the "royal law" — it is the law of the kingdom. I think it's broader than just Leviticus 19:18, but in any case, this is the perspective that James has on the law. It's the law of Jesus' kingdom. And certainly that means that the law, as James sees it, is not a set of rules. It's not a series of do's and don'ts. Rather, James sees the law as a revelation of God's character, and therefore, James is not really interested in the kinds of questions that many Jewish interpreters of the law were interested in. He never mentions circumcision. He never talks about the Sabbath. He doesn't talk about the ceremonial law. He's not interested in food laws. Rather, James is interested in the big issues: showing mercy, caring for the poor and respecting them, showing genuine humility, endurance in the face of suffering, and perseverance in prayer and such things. Furthermore, James indicates that he's concerned with the way the law as a whole functions, and that means that you don't get to pick and choose which laws you command. He says if you don't commit adultery, that's fine, but then if you go and commit murder, then you're still a lawbreaker. James seems to conclude that with a focus on the thing that most counts, which is showing mercy. He even says mercy triumphs over condemnation, because it's God's character of mercy that really is the controlling feature, the controlling idea of the law as God gave it. James also refers to the law as a "perfect law" in 1:25, which he says is a law of freedom. So, this is by no means an enslaving use of the law such as Paul condemns in Galatians. James sees this law as a revelation of God's character, as something which is liberating. And the reason it's liberating is because, somewhat like a mirror, James says, it's where you can see the character of God, where you can see genuinely God's image. If you look into an actual mirror, what you see is a reflection of somebody who is made in God's image — yourself — but is a very poor reflection in many ways. But when you look into the perfect law, what you see is a reflection of the image of God as he actually is. And as we gaze at that image in faith, we are transformed into that image, and thus we gain the character of God and then the blessing of God.



**Question 8:****What is the relationship between faith and works in the Christian life?****Rev. Larry Cockrell**

The relationship between faith and works is that they are companions. I would consider them to be twins. There is a saying that goes, “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.” And so, the idea of partnership, of companionship exists in that. Primarily, when Paul deals with faith in Ephesians 2:8, he recognized that one can only come to salvation through *faith in Christ*. But then James goes on and he, I won’t say “takes it to another level,” but he provides for us the reality that if one is saved, then that salvation should be authenticated by works, meaning by the character, the lifestyle of that person, also by the kind of service that that person renders to his neighbor. If they are saved then, again, they will authenticate salvation by the kind of works that they do. He goes on to say, “Show me your faith without your works, and I’ll show you my faith by my works.” And so, again, they are twins. They do go together. If one is saved, then they will, by the grace of God, produce good works, authenticating that salvation has come to that heart.

**Rev. Clete Hux**

The relationship between faith and works is that they’re not opposed to one another as so many people think that they are. And it almost seems, however, that it’s paradoxical for the Scripture to teach that we’re saved by grace — free gift — rather than works, and then on the other hand, say that faith without works is dead. But the two really go together. As a matter of fact, if we go back to Ephesians 2:8-9, we need to look at verse 10. It says, “For we are ... created in Christ Jesus to [perform] good works.” So, we’re not saved by works. We’re saved by grace through faith that produces works and conforms us more and more to the image of Christ.

**Question 9:****What are some common ways that contemporary interpreters misunderstand the relationship between faith and justification in the epistle of James?****Dr. Brandon D. Crowe**

Sometimes people can misunderstand the teaching of James and think that he may be teaching a different view of faith or a different understanding of justification than we have elsewhere in the New Testament. But, in fact, James is fully in accord with what we have, for example, in Paul’s letters. The whole book of James is concerned that our faith is legitimate faith; it’s real faith. And what can be confusing is sometimes James can speak of faith that is not a saving faith. There is a type of faith for James that is not a real faith. And so James can use the term to refer to both genuine, saving faith and to faith that only claims to be genuine. And when one reads Paul, for example, and compares Paul to James, Paul generally refers faith to refer only to genuine, saving faith. And so, in James 2, whenever he critiques those who say they

have faith but have no works, what he is really critiquing is those who only claim to have faith. And in fact, if you look at James and Paul, they have many similar things to say about faith and works and justification. In fact, both James and Paul look to Abraham as an example of faith, and both James and Paul quote Genesis 15:6 to illustrate faith that believes God in his Word and acts. Paul himself also believes that faith must be active. So, when we read the book of James, and he says that our faith must be genuine, he says that our faith must have actions that flow from it. And when James says that faith must have works, we must understand very clearly that these are not the works that Paul himself says are inadequate to save us. James would agree that our works cannot save us, but the works that he commends to us are works of Christian obedience that flow from a genuine faith. When Paul critiques works, he is actually critiquing “works of the Law,” which is a technical phrase to refer to Jewish ritual observances that some people were thinking modified or advanced their standing before God if they kept them. James and Paul would agree that genuine, saving faith trusts Christ with empty hands, as we trust Christ to be the perfect sacrifice in our place. This position of a faith that must be active is, in James, in full agreement with Paul’s emphasis on justification as a free gift of God... The differences and similarities between James and Paul were helpfully summarized by New Testament scholar J. Gresham Machen. Machen said, “As the faith which James condemns is different from the faith that Paul commends, so the works that Paul condemns are different from the works that James commends.” What that means simply is the works that Paul condemns are works of the Law. The works that James commends to us are works of obedience that come from real faith in Christ. And the faith that James says is inadequate is a faith that does not act; whereas, the faith that Paul speaks about is a genuine, saving faith that actually does also lead to good works that are wrought by God’s grace in us.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

I think because we so often use certain terms in certain ways in the Christian church, we think that they always mean that and have always meant that in different ways. So, for instance, we’ll use the term “justification,” and by justification we often and rightly mean in our systematic theology that one has been reckoned righteous by the imputation, or by the giving to us, of the righteousness of Christ. And if we read James’ discussion of justification of faith and works in that light, we will misunderstand what he means. And so, what we need to recognize is that the term “justification” in the Bible has several different senses, and one is just that, the idea of reckoning one person’s righteousness to another, receiving a righteousness that is not ours. But another meaning of justification is a meaning that indicates that our actions, at the end of the day, show that we are indeed a follower of God, that we are faithful to him. And so, when he’s concerned about justification, he’s often concerned more about that notion of our actions displaying a faith, and he’s not trying to say that our works themselves save, but the faith that shows itself in works receives the gracious work of God and thus receives justification.

**Dr. Thomas L. Keene**

Well, there are two kinds of misunderstandings that people can make when it comes to faith and justification in the epistle of James. One has to do with faith. The other has to do, unsurprisingly, with justification. The one with faith is people can assume that the faith that James opposes, the faith that James says does not save, is the same kind of faith that Paul says *does* save, so that there's this conflict between James and Paul because they're talking about the exact same kind of faith. And that's not true. James actually highly qualifies the kind of faith that he's talking about. He's talking about faith which is mere belief. He's talking about faith which doesn't work. He's talking about a faith which is just words. It's similar to walking down the street and telling a poor person, "Go and be warm and filled," and not giving them anything, not helping them at all. It's a hypocritical faith. And at no point does Paul say a hypocritical faith, and a hypocritical faith alone, will save you. So, there's a misunderstanding about faith that's happening there. James is raising a caricature, defining faith in a certain way and saying that that kind of faith, the faith that is just words, doesn't save you.

The other mistake that we can make is with regards to justification. The assumption here is that whenever you see the word "justification" in Scripture, it has to mean exactly the same thing. Justification isn't a technical term, at least not yet. It becomes a technical term, and we typically use it as a technical term, and we should respect that as we talk about justification. In Scripture, it's not yet a technical term. It can be used in a variety of different ways, and in the context of James, I think it would be better to translate that something like "vindicate," that our faith is vindicated, or proven, or demonstrated by our works. So, the faith which saves is a faith which is at work in the conduct of the believer. And again, that is very similar to actually what Paul tells us. Paul tells us in Galatians that the faith that we have produces conduct. There is an obedience of faith, an obedience that inevitably and invariably comes from faith, which we should cultivate. James is concerned with that as well. He wants us to cultivate our faith and develop our maturity, particularly in a context of trial and temptation.

**Question 10:**

**In what ways did James and Paul complement each other when they discussed faith and justification in their letters?**

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

It's rather famous that Paul and James appear at first blush to contradict each other because Paul says that we're justified apart from works, and James seems to insist the opposite, that we're justified, he almost says, by our works. Maybe I can read the key text. And, of course, James knows we're justified by faith, and he says that. He says in chapter 2:

**[T]he Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God and it was counted [or “reckoned”] to him as righteousness”**

So, that’s the language of forensic justification. He believed, and as we know from the background of that text, he believed at a low point when he was kind of talking back to God and saying, “Hey, where’s that son you promised,” and God said, “Look, I know you don’t have any yet, but look at the stars. So shall your offspring be.” And he believed it, and it was reckoned as righteousness to him. That’s justification by faith. James knows that quite well. But almost as if to push his audience on the importance of works, he then says:

**— and he [Abraham] was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out ... another way? (James 2:23-25).**

So, James knows we’re justified by faith, but he then says “by works.” So, what would the work be for Abraham? Well, it’s kind of close to what Paul says in Romans 4, that he kept on sleeping with his wife. As Paul says it, he saw or considered the fact that his body was as good as dead, but he kept on sleeping with his wife, so that’s believing that God would give him children and acting both. The Rahab case is very similar. I mean, she heard about the God of Israel who was sending his people into the Promised Land, and she believed it. But what good would her faith actually have done her in that instance when they came, if she hadn’t acted on it? So, the deeds vindicate or verify her faith. And that is a use of the word justification too if someone is justified, sometimes they’re vindicated. So, Jesus says in one place, “Wisdom is justified by her deeds,” meaning vindicated. That is to say, you know wisdom is truly wisdom when it works, when we practice it. In the similar vein, you know faith is really faith as opposed to false faith when it proves itself by deeds. So it was with Abraham. He’s justified by faith; he trusts God. And then we have proof that he really believes in God when he keeps sleeping with his wife so he can have children. And Rahab really believed in God, the God of Israel, and it’s proven or demonstrated when she sends the spies out another way... Faith without works is dead. James says that three times over, and then he illustrates real faith by saying, okay, here’s the faith of Abraham, here’s the faith of Rahab. They said they believed, and they proved it by their deeds. And that’s the way it should be for us. You know, our deeds sometimes lag behind our faith, but there should always be some deed, some tangible proof that we’re not just saying the words, we’re actually following God in our bodies, in our hands, in our feet, in our mouth, in our head, on our backs, in all that we are and all that we do.

### **Dr. Dan McCartney**

You may know that James is very famous for apparently, on the surface, being opposed to what Paul says about justification, and in fact Martin Luther famously called it an “epistle of straw” because he saw it as a contradiction. And indeed, if you

look at 2:24, it does appear, on the surface, to be directly contrary to what Paul says, because James says, “So you see then that a man is justified not by faith only, but by works,” specifically looking at Abraham. So, on the surface, it looks like James is contradictory to Paul. But if you look closely at what problems James is addressing with a kind of faith that is actually not a real faith at all and therefore, very dangerous, and what he means by works, which is obedience that is flowing out of a heart of faith, that’s very different than the concerns that Paul has, which is with a kind of works which is seeking one’s own righteousness before God. And Paul doesn’t even address the question there in Galatians of genuine versus un-genuine faith. So, the issues are very different, and it’s only in a superficial way that they appear to contradict. In fact, James is actually very, very concerned with real faith, with *faith*, and it’s precisely because he is so deeply concerned with faith, the faith that saves, that he is concerned that it be genuine faith, because, as we noted already, it’s very easy to convince yourself you have faith even though you don’t. And James wants to make sure that this faith is the kind of faith that really is an expression of confidence and commitment and trust in Jesus. So, it’s interesting to note how James uses certain examples of this real kind of faith. He refers first of all to Abraham, and he actually quotes the same verse that Paul does with regard to justification by faith, that Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness. And James points out that Abraham’s faith is a kind of faith that is so committed, so trusting, that it will go all the way to his obedience, even to the offering of his son. And therefore, they both agree Abraham was justified by faith. The issue is what kind of faith for James. Furthermore, James refers to the kinds of examples of works with reference to what Abraham did, first in his willingness to offer Isaac, but very interestingly in the example of Rahab, because Rahab was, first of all, a Gentile; she wasn’t even Jewish. And secondly, she was a prostitute. And yet, here she demonstrated a kind of faith, a real belief in God in that when she saw the Israelites there, she somehow knew, “God is for this people, and I want to put my trust in that God.” So, she’s willing to take a risk in sheltering the Israelite spies, and therefore, was saved. That’s a kind of faith that actually acts because you really believe that something is true. And that’s the example that underscores what James really indicated there. It’s not following all the jots and tittles of commandments. It’s rather, recognizing that God is the true God and casting yourself entirely on him. This is something that we might overlook if we didn’t have the book of James. I think you can find that requirement of obedience even in Paul, because if you keep reading in Galatians and in Romans, you get to the later chapters where he talks about the necessity of obedience, and you won’t inherit the kingdom if you don’t live a life in accordance with that faith. But evangelicals sometimes have tended to overlook that aspect, and if we didn’t have the book of James, we might miss some of that, so I’m very thankful for this book. It makes me uncomfortable as I read it, but that’s good because it reminds me of just what God expects of a life of faith.

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams**

Now, many people think James and Paul are at odds in the way that they talk about justification by faith, that Paul talks about being justified by faith apart from works, and many look at what James says as contradicting that and saying that we are

justified by works. But in reality, that's not at all what James is saying. They're showing two sides. Where Paul talks about justification by faith alone, what James talks about is, justified faith is not alone. It's demonstrated. When there's real faith, when there's true faith, it's demonstrated in our works, as he talks about here in chapter 2:

**What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?**

And he's not saying that their faith is what saves them, but he's saying their faith, and their actions demonstrating faith, demonstrate that there's a work of salvation, that they're justified already, that God has done something in their heart to move them, to act in faith.

**Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17, NIV).**

And again, he uses the poor as an example, and our faith is demonstrated often in how we respond to the poor. The examples that James uses here in the second part of chapter two are of Abraham and Rahab, which is interesting because in Hebrews 11 they're two people that are featured in the hall of faith, of a whole chapter of people who demonstrated their faith by what they did, which is what James is talking about here. And this is not a contradiction from Paul. Paul even describes ... we're not saved by works, but by grace through faith. But again, we're not saved by our good works, but we're saved *for* good works. Paul talks about the good works that are prepared in advance for us that we might walk in them. And so, he and James are not in disagreement. They're in agreement. They're talking about two different sides of the same coin. So, we're justified by faith alone, but faith that justifies is not alone. It is accompanied by deeds. And that second part is what James is focusing on here.

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