

## The General Epistle of James Ep 228



In this outline are a few links to some of my favorite books that have really helped me understand the context and content of the scriptures. [Click here to see all of my favorite books on Amazon](#). As an Amazon Affiliate, I do earn a small commission from qualifying purchases (at no extra cost to you).

### James the Just, the Brother of the Lord

The author of the Epistle of James is traditionally believed to be James the Just, also known as James the brother of Jesus. According to historical accounts and biblical references, James was a significant figure in the early Christian community and held a prominent leadership role in the Jerusalem church. He was the son of Mary and Joseph and is mentioned alongside Jesus' siblings in the Gospels (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55-56). James became a prominent apostle and was among the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). After Jesus' ascension, James played a crucial role in guiding the early Christian community, particularly the Jewish-Christian believers. He is depicted as a respected and authoritative figure in the early church and is often referred to as "James the Just" for his devotion to righteous living and his adherence to Jewish traditions. The Epistle of James, attributed to him, addresses various practical and ethical issues within the Christian community and reflects his pastoral concerns and commitment to the application of faith in daily life. Despite some debates about the exact identity of the author, the traditional belief in James the Just as the writer remains prevalent in Christian history and scholarship.

Scholars have noted how James was held in high esteem:

Josephus and some later Jewish-Christian writers reported the great esteem that fellow Jerusalemites, especially the poor, had for James. Non-Christian as well as Christian Jerusalemites admired his piety, but his denunciations of abuses by the aristocracy (as in 5:1-6) undoubtedly played a large role in the aristocratic priesthood's opposition to him. About the year AD 62, when the procurator Festus died, the high priest Ananus II executed James and some other people. The public outcry was so great, however, that when the new procurator Albinus arrived, Ananus was deposed from the high priesthood over the matter (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200-203).<sup>1</sup>

Eusebius quotes Hegesippus, a second-century Jewish Christian, who told the following details concerning James's death: Jewish leaders waited for retribution against James, the brother of the Lord. Deeply respected in the Jewish community for his godly and prayerful life, the Apostle was called 'James the just.' But he lost civil protection when the Roman governor died. Jewish leaders then forced James to stand on a temple wall at Passover and demanded that he deny

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Keener, [The IVP Bible Background Commentary](#), IVP Academic, 2014, p. 669.

Jesus before the massed pilgrims. Instead, James bore a powerful testimony of Christ and was thrown to the ground and stoned. He died while praying that his persecutors would be forgiven.<sup>2</sup>

### **Context**

Although James's teaching can apply to a variety of situations (and was probably so applied by the letter's Diaspora audience), this commentary can provide the most specific background by giving special attention to how the teachings would have applied concretely in James's immediate environment in Judea. This environment shaped the issues James had to address toward the end of his life. More than a century before this time, the Roman general Pompey had cut Judean territory and made many Jewish peasants landless; the exorbitant taxes of Herod the Great must have driven more small farmers out of business. In the first century, many peasants worked as tenants on larger, feudal estates (as elsewhere in the empire); others became landless day laborers in the marketplaces, finding work only sporadically (more was available in harvest season). Resentment against aristocratic landlords ran high in many parts of the empire, but nonpayment of promised goods to them was hardly an option; a few landowners even had their own hit squads of hired assassins to deal with uncooperative tenants. The situation was less extreme in the cities, but even there the divisions were obvious (e.g., the aristocracy in Jerusalem's Upper City versus the poor living downwind of that city's sewers). When the aristocratic priests began to withhold tithe income from the poorer priests, their only means of support, economic tensions increased.

In Rome, grain shortages often led to rioting. Social and economic tensions in Palestine were contained longer but eventually yielded to violence. Pursuing peace with Rome through practical politics, the Jerusalem aristocracy became an object of hatred to Zealots and other elements of resistance, who felt that God alone should rule the land. (Josephus, who wished to minimize the anti-Roman sentiment that prevailed in Judea just before the war, tried to marginalize the Zealots as a fringe group; but other evidence in his narrative shows clearly that revolutionary sympathies in general were widespread.) Various outbreaks of violence eventually culminated in a revolt in a.d. 66, followed by a massacre of priests and the Roman garrison on the Temple Mount. Aristocratic and proletarian patriots clashed inside the city as Roman armies surrounded it, and in a.d. 70 Jerusalem fell and its temple was destroyed. The final resistance stronghold at Masada fell in a.d. 73.<sup>3</sup>

### **Audience of the Letter**

James primarily directs his message to Jewish Christians, and likely any other receptive Jews, who find themselves entangled in the escalating social tensions that eventually led to the tumultuous war of 66-70 AD. While the circumstances he addresses align most directly with his own experiences in Judea, his epistle also speaks to the broader social unrest unfolding across the Roman world. The Judean war of 66-70 witnessed a sequence of violent changes in power, with three emperors being overthrown by Rome in a single year (69 AD). Moreover, the impact of the conflict persisted beyond its conclusion, as resistance fighters continued disseminating their ideologies to Jewish communities in other areas of the empire.

### **Themes of James**

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Lloyd Anderson, "[The First Presidency of the Early Church: Their Lives and Epistles](#)," *Ensign*, Aug. 1988, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 669-670.

The general epistle of James, attributed to James the Just, the brother of Jesus, addresses various practical and ethical issues within the Christian community of the first century.<sup>4</sup> Some of the main themes found in the Epistle of James include:

1. **Faith and Works:** James emphasizes the importance of putting one's faith into action through good deeds. He cautions against a faith that is merely intellectual or theoretical, stressing that genuine faith will be evident through righteous conduct and compassion for others.
2. **Trials and Temptations:** James addresses the challenges and trials faced by believers, encouraging them to persevere and seek wisdom from God during difficult times. He warns against being led astray by temptations and urges readers to remain steadfast in their devotion to God.
3. **Wisdom and Speech:** The letter contains strong exhortations about the power of the tongue and the need for wise and controlled speech. James emphasizes the importance of using words to build up and encourage others, while also warning against gossip, slander, and harsh language.
4. **Fairness in Society and Concern for the Poor:** The epistle advocates for the fair treatment of all people, particularly the poor and marginalized. James criticizes favoritism and shows concern for the vulnerable members of society, urging believers to practice true religion by caring for those in need.
5. **Obedience to God's Word:** James emphasizes the significance of not just listening to God's word but also obeying it. He highlights the transformative power of God's teachings in shaping the character and behavior of those who believe in Christ.
6. **Humility and Pride:** The epistle addresses the dangers of pride and self-centeredness, encouraging humility. James emphasizes the need to submit to God and resist the allure of worldly arrogance.
7. **Patience and Endurance:** James encourages believers to cultivate patience and endurance in the face of challenges, trusting in God's timing and providence.

Overall, the general epistle of James provides a practical guide for Christian living, promoting a faith that is active, compassionate, and deeply connected to God's wisdom and teachings. It serves as a call to authentic discipleship and an invitation to live out one's faith with sincerity and genuine love for others.

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<sup>4</sup> According to historical accounts, James the Just, also known as James the brother of Jesus, was killed in approximately 62 AD. He was stoned to death by a group of Jewish authorities, who were reportedly displeased with his teachings and his prominent leadership role in the early Christian community. James's death is recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus in his work "Antiquities of the Jews," which provides information about various figures and events during that time period. The execution of James is regarded as a significant event in the early Christian movement and underscores the challenges and persecution faced by the early believers. See: [The Antiquities of the Jews](#), 20.197–20.223 where Josephus writes, "Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned."

The counsel by Brigham Young, when he found that many of the Saints were scattered on the plains of Wyoming in the early October snows, fits here. As the last of the Martin handcart company entered the valley, Brigham Young stood before a conference in Salt Lake City. He recounted the peril of the Saints traveling in the snow and declared that they had a great labor ahead: “we had supposed that we should see the kingdom of God established on earth and Zion become the joy thereof, by merely gathering to the several Stakes; and that then our labors would be done and we should have nothing to do but sit and sing ourselves away to everlasting bliss; but we will find that preaching the gospel is but a small portion of the labor that is upon us.”

Brigham declared that they would take the pioneers in among them – that he would take them all if no one else would – and that they should treat their frostbite and starvation. In doing so, he uttered counsel that has persisted with us:

The afternoon meeting will be omitted, for I wish the sisters to go home and prepare to give those who have just arrived a mouthful of something to eat, and to wash them and nurse them up. You know that I would give more for a dish of pudding and milk, or a baked potato and salt, were I in the situation of those who have just come in, than I would for your prayers, though you were to stay here all the afternoon and pray. Prayer is good, but when baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place on this occasion; give every duty its proper time and place.<sup>5</sup>

## Outline

### I. Introduction

A. Greeting and identification of the author, addressing the recipients as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1.1)

Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ [χαίρειν](#).

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, [greeting](#). (James 1.1)

Because “James” is an English substitution for the original “Jacob” (as always in the New Testament), some writers have surmised here a symbolic “Jacob” addressing the twelve tribes of Israel, as Jacob addressed his descendants in the testament in Genesis 49. This suggestion is often associated with the assumption of pseudonymity, but it is also possible that James would play on his own name. Plays on names were common (e.g., Mt 16:18)...

Most Jewish people believed that ten of the twelve tribes had been lost for centuries, and they would be restored only at the end of the age. They were thought to exist somewhere, however, so James’s address may just mean, “To all my Jewish brothers and sisters scattered throughout the world.” The “dispersion” or Diaspora included Jews in the Parthian as well as the Roman Empire, and James would meet Jews from many nations at the pilgrimage festivals to Jerusalem. Some commentators believe that he means the term symbolically for all Christians as spiritual

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<sup>5</sup> Brigham Young, Sermon, in “Remarks by President Brigham Young, Tabernacle, Nov. 30, 1856,” *Deseret News*, December 10, 1856, 320.

Israelites, on the analogy of 1 Peter 1:1, but given the letter's contents, James probably particularly addresses Jewish Christians.<sup>6</sup>

## II. Faith, Trials, Temptation, and Gifts (James 1.2-18)

### A. Encouragement to consider trials as opportunities for growth (James 1:2-4)

Elder Maxwell taught:

James stressed the importance of patience when our faith is being tried, because those grueling experiences 'worketh patience'; he said, in what was almost a sigh of the soul, 'let patience have her perfect work.' (James 1:3-4.) To Joseph Smith, the Lord described patience as having a special finishing or concluding role, for 'these things remain to be overcome through patience, that such may receive an exceeding and eternal weight of glory.' (D&C 63:66.) A patient disciple will not be surprised or undone when the Church is misrepresented.

Peter, being toughminded as well as tender, made the test of our patience even more precise and demanding when he said, 'For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.' (1 Peter 2:20.) The dues of discipleship are high indeed, and how much we can take so often determines how much we can then give!<sup>7</sup>

### B. Seeking wisdom from God during trials (James 1:5-8)

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. (James 1.5-6)

### The Impact of James 1.5

Elder McConkie taught:

This single verse of scripture has had a greater impact and a more far-reaching effect upon mankind than any other single sentence ever recorded by any prophet in any age. It might well be said that the crowning act of the ministry of James was not his martyrdom for the testimony of Jesus, but his recitation, as guided by the Holy Ghost, of these simple words which led to the opening of the heavens in modern times.

And it might well be added that every investigator of revealed truth stands, at some time in the course of his search, in the place where Joseph Smith stood. He must turn to the Almighty and gain wisdom from God by revelation if he is to gain a place on that strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life.<sup>8</sup>

### C. The contrast between the rich and the humble in their status (James 1:9-11)

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<sup>6</sup> Keener, [Background](#), p. 672.

<sup>7</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, [Notwithstanding My Weakness](#), Deseret Book, 1981, p. 62-63.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, [Doctrinal New Testament Commentary](#), 3 vols. Bookcraft, 1965-1973, 3: 247.

Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways (James 1.9-11).

Wealthy landowners regularly exploited the poor throughout the empire, and Palestine was no exception; such economic tensions eventually provoked a war against Rome, in the course of which less well-to-do Jewish patriots slaughtered Jewish aristocrats. The Old Testament and Jewish wisdom literature stress that riches fade, that God vindicates the oppressed and the poor in the end, and that he judges those who keep their wealth and do not share with the poor. James's final statement here resembles Isaiah 40:6-7 and Psalm 102:4, 11 and 16, although the idea was by this time common. The "scorching wind" (nasb) might refer to the sirocco, an especially devastating hot wind blowing into Palestine from the southern desert. But the summer sun by itself was also quite effective in wilting Palestinian flowers, which were then useless except as fuel.<sup>9</sup>

#### D. Perseverance and reward for enduring trials (James 1:12)

This verse can be aptly called the "beatitude of James," and it comes as no surprise that he adopts this teaching technique, having witnessed his half-brother Jesus employ it frequently. The reward for enduring temptation, termed the "crown of life," holds significant instructional value. The symbolism of the crown lies in its representation of royal authority, wherein a king or queen must govern their subjects wisely and confront any threatening adversaries. Similarly, each of us faces a similar challenge. Only those who have mastered the art of reigning over their own passions, keeping them in the bounds the Lord has set, maintaining control while simultaneously fending off the adversary's attacks, can truly merit authority in God's kingdom. The imagery emphasizes the necessity of spiritual discipline and resilience to obtain royal standing in the divine realm.

One scholar explains:

James uses the beatitude form common in ancient literature, especially Jewish literature: "How happy is the person who . . ." Distresses were viewed as temptations, providing opportunities to sin. The term translated "trials" (nasb, gnt; cf. niv) or "testing" did not necessarily mean "temptation" (kjv, nrsv) in the modern sense, however; the tester could be interested in the distressed person's perseverance, rather than his or her defeat. Famines, poverty and oppression were among events viewed as testings.<sup>10</sup>

#### E. Every man is tempted (James 1.13-16)

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man (James 1.13).

President Kimball explained:

'God made me that way,' some say, as they rationalize and excuse themselves for their perversions. 'I can't help it,' they add. This is blasphemy. Is man not made in the image of God,

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<sup>9</sup> Keener, [Background](#), p. 672.

<sup>10</sup> Keener, p. 673.

and does he think God to be 'that way'? Man is responsible for his own sins. It is possible that he may rationalize and excuse himself until the groove is so deep that he cannot get out without great difficulty, but he can resist, he can change. Temptations come to all people. The difference between the reprobate and the worthy person is generally that one yielded and the other resisted. It is true that one's background may make the decision and accomplishment easier or more difficult, but if one is mentally alert, he can still control his future. That is the gospel message-personal responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

F. God is the giver of all good gifts (James 1.17-18)

All good gifts come from Christ, as Moroni has explained.

Moroni 10.17-18 read:

And all these gifts come by the Spirit of Christ; and they come unto every man severally, according as he will. And I would exhort you, my beloved brethren, that ye remember that every good gift cometh of Christ.

### III. Wisdom, Speech, and Obedience (James 1.19-27)

A. The importance of controlling one's tongue and speech (James 1:19-21)

B. Being doers of the Word, not just hearers (James 1:22-25)

Elder Bednar taught:

The exercise of faith in Jesus Christ is relying upon His merits, mercy, and grace. (2 Nephi 2:8 31:19 Moroni 6:4) We begin to come to know the Savior as we arouse our spiritual faculties and experiment upon His teachings, even until we can give place in our souls for a portion of His words. (Alma 32:27) As our faith in the Lord increases, we trust in Him and have confidence in His power to redeem, heal, and strengthen us.

True faith is focused in and on the Lord and always leads to righteous action. "Faith [in Christ is] the first principle in revealed religion, ... the foundation of all righteousness, ... and the principle of action in all intelligent beings." [*Lectures on Faith* (1985), 1.] Because acting in accordance with the correct principles the Redeemer proclaimed is central to receiving and exercising true faith, "faith without works is dead." (James 2:20) We are to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only." (James 1:22)

Hearing God's word and receiving the spiritual gift of faith in the Savior are closely related, as "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17) We become acquainted with Him and His voice as we study and feast upon His word in the scriptures, (2 Nephi 32:3; Doctrine and Covenants 18:34–36) pray to the Father in His name with real intent, (Moroni 10:4) and seek for the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. (John 14:26; Doctrine and Covenants 121:46) Learning and applying in our lives the doctrine of Christ is a prerequisite to receiving the gift of faith in Him.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> [President Kimball Speaks Out](#), Deseret Book, 1981, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Elder David A. Bednar, "[If Ye Had Known Me](#)," October Conference 2016.

### C. Religion and true piety: caring for orphans and widows (James 1:26-27)

Pres. Howard W. Hunter taught:

James said,

"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1.26-27)

In other words, religion is more than a knowledge of God or a confession of faith, and it is more than theology. Religion is the doing of the word of God. It is being our brother's keeper (Gen. 4.9) among other things. To keep unspotted from the world does not mean that one must withdraw from all association with the world, but rather to keep away from the evils of the world; or as more beautifully put in one of our hymns, "Freedom from earth stains."<sup>13</sup>

President Thomas S. Monson taught:

To the Prophet Joseph Smith (The Lord) directed, 'The storehouse shall be kept by the consecrations of the church; and widows and orphans shall be provided for, as also the poor.' (D&C 83:6.)

Such teachings were not new then. They are not new now. Consistently the Master has taught, by example, His concern for the widow. To the grieving widow at Nain, bereft of her only son, He came personally and to the dead son restored the breath of life-and to the astonished widow her son. To the widow at Zarephath, who with her son faced imminent starvation, He sent the prophet Elijah with the power to teach faith as well as provide food.

We may say to ourselves, 'But that was long ago and ever so far away.' I respond: 'Is there a city called Zarephath near your home? Is there a town known as Nain?' We may know our cities as Columbus or Coalville, Detroit or Denver. Whatever the name, there lives within each city the widow deprived of her companion and often her child. The need is the same. The affliction is real.<sup>14</sup>

### Orphans and Widows in Antiquity

In contrast to the violent and unruly religion of the Jewish revolutionaries, true religion involves defending the socially powerless (Ex 22:20-24; Ps 146:9; Is 1:17) and avoiding worldliness (i.e., the values and behavior of the world; see comment on 4:4). Orphans and widows had neither direct means of support nor automatic legal defenders in that society. Later Jewish sources suggest that at least in Judea, charity distributors tried to ensure that widows and orphans were cared for if they had no relatives to help them; such charity is also part of the visiting envisioned here. Greek society did look out for freeborn orphans, but not other ones. Jewish people visited

<sup>13</sup> Howard W. Hunter, "An Everyday Religion," October Conference 1961.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas S. Monson, "[The Long Line of the Lonely](#)," *Ensign*, May 1981.



the bereaved especially during the first week of their bereavement but also afterward, and they likewise visited the sick. Many GrecoRoman writers also valued visiting the sick and bereaved.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV. Fairness in Society and Favoritism (James 2.1-26)

##### A. Condemnation of showing favoritism in the Christian community (James 2:1-7)

Moralists and satirists mocked the special respect given to the wealthy, which often amounted to a self-demeaning way to seek funds or other help. Illustrations like this one could be hypothetical, which fit the writer's diatribe style of argument. In Rome the senatorial class wore gold rings; some members of this class sought popular support for favors shown to various groups. But rings were hardly limited to them; in the eastern Mediterranean gold rings also marked great wealth and status. Clothing likewise distinguished the wealthy, who could be ostentatious, from others; many peasants had only one cloak, which would thus often be dirty.<sup>16</sup>

Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? (James 2.4)

Roman laws explicitly favored the rich. Persons of lower class, who were thought to act from economic self-interest, could not bring accusations against persons of higher class, and the laws prescribed harsher penalties for lower-class persons convicted of offenses than for offenders from the higher class. Biblical law, most Jewish law and traditional Greek philosophers had always rejected such distinctions as immoral... The Old Testament forbade partiality on the basis of economic status (Lev 19:15) and called judges among God's people to judge impartially, as God did.<sup>17</sup>

##### B. Upholding the royal law of love and treating others justly (James 2:8-13)

ὅστις γὰρ ὅλον τὸν νόμον τηρήσει, πταίσει δὲ ἐν ἐνί γέγονεν πάντων ἔνοχος.

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all. (James 2.10)

Joseph Fielding Smith explained this verse in this manner:

James did not mean that a man who stole was guilty of murder, or that one who lied was guilty of unchastity. He was endeavoring to impress upon the minds of the members that the kingdom of God is *one*. Its laws are perfect. No unclean person can enter there. Since it is a perfect kingdom, its laws must be obeyed. There can be no disunity, no opposition in that kingdom. Being an immortal kingdom with laws that have been proved through the eternities, they are perfect, therefore there is no room for varied opinions in relation to its government, such as we find in human man-made governments. These laws cannot be changed... They are based on justice and mercy with the perfect love of God. Therefore each who enters the kingdom must of his own free will accept all of the laws and be obedient to them, finding himself in complete accord with all. Anything short of this would cause confusion. Therefore the words of James are

<sup>15</sup> Keener, [Background](#), p. 674.

<sup>16</sup> Keener, p. 675.

<sup>17</sup> Keener, p. 675.

true. Unless a man can abide strictly in complete accord, he cannot enter there, and in the words of James, he is guilty of all.<sup>18</sup>

Craig Keener gives this historical context to James 2.10:

Jewish teachers distinguished “heavier” from “lighter” sins, but felt that God required obedience to even the “smallest” commandments (e.g., Mishnah *Avot* 2:1; 4:2; Mishnah *Qiddushin* 1:10; *Sifre Deuteronomy* 76.1.1), rewarding the obedient with eternal life and punishing transgressors with damnation. That willful violation of even a minor transgression was tantamount to rejecting the whole law was one of their most commonly repeated views (e.g., R. Meir in Babylonian Talmud *Bekhorot* 30a). (Ancient writers often stated principles in sharp, graphic ways but in practice showed more mercy to actual transgressors in the community.)

Traditional Stoics (against the Epicureans) went even farther in declaring that all sins were equal (e.g., Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.21.1-7), a Stoic view widely known even among non-Stoics (e.g., Cicero, *On the Ends* 4.27.74-75; Pliny, *Epistles* 8.2.3; Diogenes Laertius 7.1.120). Some Jewish writers agreed: rejecting the smallest commandment was equal to rejecting the largest, because in either case one rejected God’s law (4 Maccabees 5:19-21). The point here is that rejecting the law of economic impartiality in Leviticus 19:15, or the general principle of love behind it (Lev 19:18), was rejecting the whole authority of God (Jas 2:8). Jewish teachers often used “stumbling” as a metaphor for sin.<sup>19</sup>

For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment. (James 2.13)

James’s point here is that if his readers are not impartial judges, they will answer to the God who is an impartial judge; his impartiality in judgment is rehearsed throughout the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. Jewish teachers defined God’s character especially by two attributes, mercy and justice, and suggested that mercy normally won out over justice. They would have agreed with James that the merciless forfeited a right to mercy, and they had their own sayings similar to this one.<sup>20</sup>

C. The relationship between faith and works (James 2:14-26)

Brother Kent P. Jackson explains:

In the letter of James, it is clear that the Apostle was contending against incorrect ideas concerning the nature of faith in relation to Christian works. His corrective words include “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” (James 2:26.) An underemphasis of the works of the gospel is perhaps not the kind of problem that would bring all of Christianity to ruin, and James gave us no hint that he expected wholesale apostasy because of it. Yet those who were guilty of disregarding the importance of works had a “dead”

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, [Answers to Gospel Questions](#), 5 vols. Deseret Book, 3:26.

<sup>19</sup> Keener, [Background](#), p. 675-676.

<sup>20</sup> Keener, p. 676.

religion, to use James's word, and a "dead" religion certainly has no power to save. Perhaps without James's letter more serious problems could have developed.<sup>21</sup>

Greek scholar and Latter-day Saint Brent Schmidt, writing about James 2:17-26, gives us the following:

These orthodox Catholic doctrines that reformers adopted include the total depravity of man, the nature of God, original sin, and ...unconditional, free grace. According to Philip Cary, "Luther is notoriously no friend to free will, and his utterly unevasive commitment to prevenient grace includes no commitment at all to our will's freedom to choose the path of salvation. Rather, he professes his gladness that 'God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy.'"<sup>22</sup> Luther felt the Sermon on the Mount was the devil's masterpiece because it required too much of Christians.<sup>23</sup> He notoriously relegated the epistle of James, which emphasized that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26), to the refuse pile because it "had no gospel quality to it."<sup>24</sup>

In all fairness, it must be recognized that Luther was engaged in a polemical struggle with the Roman Catholic Church for his personal survival. Certainly for Latter-day Saints he played a central role in world history by helping to prepare a milieu of religious liberty in which the gospel could someday be restored and one in which the Bible was available in vernacular languages. However, at the same time, Luther (initially an Augustinian monk<sup>25</sup>) did perpetuate the Augustinian interpretation of free grace that has continued to perplex Christendom about how to achieve eternal life, the greatest gift of God.<sup>26</sup>

## V. Controlling the Tongue and Wisdom

A. Cautioning against teachers and the impact of their words (James 3:1-12)

Μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε ἀδελφοί μου εἰδότες ὅτι μείζον κρίμα ληψόμεθα.

My brethren, be not **many masters**, knowing that **we shall receive** the greater condemnation (James 3.1 KJV)

**Many teachers** do not become, my brothers, knowing that greater judgment **we will receive** (James 3.1, my translation).

Brigham Young taught:

Looking at the conduct of many, yea, very many, as we can see it exhibited in this our day, they want the mastery, the influence, the power. They want to be able to say to the people, "Do this or do that," and have no objections raised. They would have the people obey their voice, and yet

<sup>21</sup> Kent P. Jackson, "[Early Signs of the Apostasy](#)," *Ensign*, December, 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:289), in Cary, *Inner Grace*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar, 1906), 32:300.

<sup>24</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar, 1906), 6:10. See John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 36 n. 123 in particular.

<sup>25</sup> See Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "On Partaking of the Divine Nature: Luther's Dependence on Augustine," *Andrews University Seminary Series* 22, no. 1 (1984): 113–24.

<sup>26</sup> Brent J. Schmidt, [Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis](#), *BYU Studies*, 2015, p. 141.

they do not know how to gain the affections of the people; they do not understand the dispositions of the people.

Paul observed the same difficulty in his day. Many Elders were preaching and presiding, who were ignorant, aspiring, and tyrannical, and but few of them treated the people as kind and benevolent fathers treat their children. There were not many fathers, (1 Cor. 4:15) but there was a disposition to be “many masters,” (James 3:1) as we see here.

The most of our Elders want to be obeyed, as strictly as you are taught by them from this stand that this people ought to obey brother Heber, or brother Brigham; as strictly as they preach to you to obey our counsel.<sup>27</sup>

“The Tongue is a Little Member” (James 3.5)

President Nelson taught:

My dear brothers and sisters, how we treat each other really matters! How we speak to and about others at home, at church, at work, and online really matters. Today, I am asking us to interact with others in a higher, holier way. Please listen carefully. “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” that we can say about another person—whether to his face or behind her back—that should be *our* standard of communication.

If a couple in your ward gets divorced, or a young missionary returns home early, or a teenager doubts his testimony, they do not need your judgment. They need to experience the pure love of Jesus Christ reflected in your words and actions.

If a friend on social media has strong political or social views that violate everything you believe in, an angry, cutting retort by you will not help. Building bridges of understanding will require much more of you, but that is exactly what your friend needs.<sup>28</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

“The tongue is an unruly member—hold your tongues about things of no moment, a little tale will set the world on fire.”<sup>29</sup>

President Kimball said:

“Language is like music; we rejoice in beauty, range, and quality in both, and we are demeaned by the repetition of a few sour notes.”<sup>30</sup>

Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. (James 3.11-12)

<sup>27</sup> Brigham Young, “Our Relatives,” *JD* 4.279.

<sup>28</sup> President Russell M. Nelson, “[Peacemakers Needed](#),” April 2023 Conference.

<sup>29</sup> [The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph](#), compiled and edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook [Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980], 120 - 121.

<sup>30</sup> Pres. Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks Out on Profanity,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1981.

James produces two other common examples of impossible incongruity. Figs, olives and grapes were the three most common agricultural products of the Judean hills, and alongside wheat and barley they would have constituted the most common crops of the Mediterranean region as a whole. That everything brought forth after its kind was a matter of common observation and became proverbial in Greco-Roman circles (cf. also Gen 1:11-12, 21, 24-25).<sup>31</sup>

#### B. The nature of godly wisdom and its manifestations (James 3:13-18)

##### “Wisdom from above” (James 3.17)

Wisdom “from above,” i.e., from God (1:17; 3:15), is “pure,” not mixed with anything else (in this case, not mixed with demonic wisdom—3:14-16); it is thus also “unhypocritical.” Many Jewish wisdom texts spoke of divine wisdom coming from above. God’s genuine wisdom is nonviolent rather than given to lashing out: “peaceable,” “gentle,” “open to reason,” “full of mercy” (cf. 2:13); it was also “unwavering” (nasb), better rendered “impartial” (niv), or “without prejudice or favoritism” (cf. 2:1-9). In Judea, such wisdom is neither that of those like Zealots nor of those supporting the aristocracy.<sup>32</sup>

### VI. Conflict, Submission, and Humility

#### A. Addressing conflicts and the source of quarrels (James 4:1-3)

#### B. Drawing near to God and resisting the devil (James 4:4-10)

“Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4.4).

Hugh Nibley explains this verse in the context of a fading Christian Church as the Apostasy chokes out much of what the Savior taught:

Note the emphasis in Peter's epistles on the evil times ahead and the postponement of blessings for a definite interval: "Ye are kept . . . unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness . . . [expecting] praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (cf. 1 Peter 1:5-7). "Be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13). "Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17). "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

"But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's suffering; that when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad" (1 Peter 4:12-13). "The God of all grace . . . hath called us unto his eternal glory . . . after that ye have suffered a while" (1 Peter 5:10).

"Humble yourselves . . . that He may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:6), etc. The unpleasant interval is not to be taken seriously, "For all flesh is as grass" (1 Peter 1:24); we are merely "strangers and pilgrims" here (1 Peter 2:11); it is a frightening prospect, but "if you will it shall be as nothing." Peter preaches a thoroughgoing exchange of earthly values for heavenly values.

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<sup>31</sup> Keener, p. 678.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

James does not mince words: "Know ye not, that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). Nor does John: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world . . . is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof" (1 John 2:15-17). "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. . . . "We are of God: he that knoweth God, heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. . . . And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 John 3:13; 4:6; 5:19).

These were truly the disciples of the Lord who said, "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). ***There is no place here for a popular program. The whole consolation of the saints is in the resurrection and glory to come***, "whether we wake or sleep, . . . Wherefore comfort yourselves" (1 Thessalonians 5:10-11). ***There is a complete disconcert for the possible success or failure of the church on earth, and a total silence on the subject of future generations***—never a thought of that "inevitable triumph" which later church historians were to insist should have been their chief consolation. "The foundation of God standeth sure," not in a visible institution of salvation, but "having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). ***Every opportunity to play up the church is passed by in silence.***

The values of the early Christians were not commonsense values. The translators of the King James Version use the word lusts for the Greek *epithumia*, which means "desire, interest, value," in the broadest sense, and thus make it appear that all that John is condemning is vice and depravity, whereas actually he is renouncing all earthly values good and bad. The Christian point of view was not that of another philosophy; it administered a severe shock to intelligent people—"a slap in the face," to use Karl Holl's apt expression. Thinking people were not just amused, they were "scandalized" (a favorite word) and enraged, sickened, and disgusted; Tacitus, Celsus, Caecilius, and the Jewish and pagan professors cannot think of words strong enough to express their loathing and alarm.

***Here we have two systems of values totally and hopelessly opposed to each other. The things Jesus talked about were entirely outside the range of normal human thought and experience;*** in time their reality was to be made manifest to all, but meanwhile their rejection was to be emphatic and complete, and pagans could embarrass Christians by chanting about "Jesus the King who never ruled!" A triumphant rule and a triumphant church were not on the program, but the world would settle for nothing less, and of course the world got what it wanted—a church modeled after its idea of what a church should be. Such an institution was as clearly prophesied as was the passing away of the true church.<sup>33</sup>

C. Humility and avoiding slander against one another (James 4:11-12)

"Speak not evil one of another" (James 4.11)

Elder Kofford taught:

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<sup>33</sup> Hugh Nibley, [Mormonism and Early Christianity](#), chapter 6, "The Way of the Church," FARMS, 1987.

There are those among us who would recoil in horror at the thought of stealing another person's money or property but who don't give a second thought to stealing another person's good name or reputation.

The old adage "Never judge another man until you have walked a mile in his footsteps" is as good advice today as it was the day it was first uttered. Someone once said,

*There is so much good in the worst of us,*

*And so much bad in the best of us,*

*That it ill behooves any of us*

*To find fault with the rest of us.*

(Hazel Felleman, sel., *The Best Loved Poems of the American People* [1936], 615)

The principle is not new, nor is it unique to our day and time. The book of Psalms from the Old Testament contains this urgent warning from the Lord: "Whoso privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I cut off" (Psalm 101.)<sup>34</sup>

## VII. Trusting in God's Will, Patience in Suffering

### A. Warning against pride and reliance on worldly planning (James 4.13-17)

Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin. (James 4.17)

This precept is quite certainly of Jewish origin, even if we cannot show specific evidence for it. The expression "for him it is sin" (ἁμαρτία αὐτῷ ἐστίν) is reminiscent of "sin will be in you" and other such expressions (Deut 23 :21f; 24: 15). The content corresponds to the typically Jewish search after hidden guilt, in which every sin of omission is important. Thus Job, when examining himself for transgressions, expressly mentions sins of omission (31: 16-18), and Zophar had already (11: 6) hinted at the possibility of secret guilt.<sup>35</sup>

President David O. McKay taught:

To know one's duty, to learn the truth, is the duty of every Latter-day Saint, of every man and woman in the world, including those outside of this Church. There is a natural feeling which urges men and women towards truth; it is a responsibility placed upon mankind. But that responsibility rests upon the Latter-day Saints in greater degree than upon their fellowmen—because the Latter-day Saints have learned the truth that the everlasting gospel has been restored.

But knowing a thing, or merely feeling an assurance of the truth, is not sufficient. "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin. (James 4:17)<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Elder Kofford, "[Your Name Is Safe in Our Home](#)," *Ensign*, May 1999.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Dibelius and Heinrich Greeven, [James: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible](#), Fortress Press, 1975, p. 235.

<sup>36</sup> David O. McKay, [Steppingstones to an Abundant Life](#), Deseret Book, 1971, p. 197.

#### B. Warning to the rich oppressors (James 5.1-6)

Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. (James 5.4)

In first-century Palestine, many day laborers depended on their daily wages to purchase food for themselves and their families; withholding money could mean that they and their families would go hungry. ***The income absentee landlords received from agriculture was such that the wages they paid workers could not even begin to reflect the profits they accumulated.*** Although the rich supported public building projects (in return for attached inscriptions honoring them), they were far less inclined to pay sufficient wages to their workers. At least as early as the second century, Jewish teachers suggested that even failing to leave gleanings for the poor was robbing them (based on Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19).<sup>37</sup>

#### C. An exhortation to patience and endurance through suffering (James 5.7-11)

#### D. The power of prayer and the anointing of the sick (James 5.13-18)

### VIII. Patience, Endurance, and Prayer

#### A. Encouragement to be patient in suffering and hardship (James 5:7-8)

Throughout most of the rural areas of the Roman Empire, including much of rural Galilee, rich landowners profited from the toil of tenant farmers (often alongside slaves) who worked their massive estates. That feudalism, with its serfs working rich landowners' property, arose only in medieval times is a misconception. This arrangement is simply less prominent in literature of Roman times because Roman literature concentrated on the cities, although only about ten percent of the empire is estimated to have been urban.

Most of James's denunciation takes the form of an Old Testament prophetic judgment oracle, paralleled also in some Jewish wisdom and apocalyptic texts. The difference between his denunciation of the rich and the violent speech he himself condemns (1:19, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11) is that he (like some Jewish visionaries of his era) appeals to God's judgment rather than to human retribution (4:12; cf. Deut 32:35; Prov 20:22). His prophecy was timely; a few years later the Jewish aristocracy was virtually obliterated in the revolt against Rome.<sup>38</sup>

#### B. The example of the prophets in enduring suffering (James 5:10-11)

It is possible that James had in mind the heroes of the Maccabean period, whose suffering is extolled in 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees, or the men in the fiery furnace (1 Clem. 45.7), who are mentioned along with Abraham, Isaac, and Daniel in 4 Maccabees 16.20.<sup>39</sup>

"Ye have heard of the patience of Job" (James 5.11)

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<sup>37</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 681, emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 680.

<sup>39</sup> Dibelus, *James*, p. 245.



The entire structure of the book of Job may have been meant to encourage Israel after the exile; although God's justice seemed far away and they were mocked by the nations, God would ultimately vindicate them and end their captivity (cf. the Hebrew of Job 42:10). Hellenistic Jewish tradition further celebrated Job's endurance (e.g., the *Testament of Job*, and Aristeas the Exegete). (Various later rabbis evaluated him differently, some positively, some negatively. The *Testament of Job* includes Stoic language for the virtue of endurance and transfers some earlier depictions of Abraham to Job; this transferral may have been the source of one later rabbi's rare conclusion that Job was greater than Abraham.)<sup>40</sup>

### C. The power of prayer and the healing of the sick (James 5:13-18)

President Hinckley taught:

That power to heal the sick is still among us. It is the power of the priesthood of God. It is the authority held by the elders of this Church.

We welcome and praise and utilize the marvelous procedures of modern medicine which have done so much to alleviate human suffering and lengthen human life. All of us are indebted to the dedicated men and women of science and medicine who have conquered so much of disease, who have mitigated pain, who have stayed the hand of death. I cannot say enough of gratitude for them.

Yet they are the first to admit the limitations of their knowledge and the imperfection of their skills in dealing with many matters of life and death... I venture to say that there is scarcely a faithful elder within the sound of my voice who could not recount instances in which this healing power has been made manifest in behalf of the sick. It is the healing power of Christ. And there is much of sickness among us other than that of the body.<sup>41</sup>

Elder Oaks taught:

When someone has been anointed by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, the anointing is sealed by that same authority. To seal something means to affirm it, to make it binding for its intended purpose. When elders anoint a sick person and seal the anointing, they open the windows of heaven for the Lord to pour forth the blessing He wills for the person afflicted.

President Brigham Young taught: "When I lay hands on the sick, I expect the healing power and influence of God to pass through me to the patient, and the disease to give way. ... When we are prepared, when we are holy vessels before the Lord, a stream of power from the Almighty can pass through the tabernacle of the administrator to the system of the patient, and the sick are made whole."<sup>42</sup>

Although we know of many cases where persons blessed by priesthood authority have been healed, we rarely refer to these healings in public meetings because modern revelation cautions

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<sup>40</sup> Keener, p. 682.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, "[The Healing Power of Christ](#)," October Conference, 1988.

<sup>42</sup> *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 252; see also Russell M. Nelson, "Neither Trust in the Arm of Flesh," *Liahona*, Mar. 2010, 40; *Ensign*, Mar. 2010, 24; *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (1997), 474.

us not to “boast [ourselves] of these things, neither speak them before the world; for these things are given unto you for your profit and for salvation” (D&C 84:73).<sup>43</sup>

“And if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him” (James 5:15).

Elder McConkie taught:

Where members of the Church are concerned, there is a close connection between manifestations of healing grace and the forgiveness of sins. When the elders administer to faithful saints, the promise is: “And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” (James 5:15.) The very fact that a member of the kingdom has matured in the gospel to the point that he has power through faith in Christ to be healed means that he also has so lived that he is entitled to have his sins remitted. Since all men repeatedly sin they must all gain successive remissions of their sins, otherwise none would eventually stand pure and spotless before the Lord and thus be worthy of a celestial inheritance.<sup>44</sup>

D. Believers in Jesus have opportunity to restore those that are lost (James 5:19-20)

In Jewish belief, the former righteousness of one who turned away was no longer counted in his or her favor (Ezek 18:24- 25), but (in most Jewish formulations) the repentance of the wicked canceled out his or her former wickedness (Ezek 18:21-23), if conjoined with proper atonement. Some Jews (Dead Sea Scrolls, some rabbis) regarded some forms of apostasy as unforgivable, but James welcomes the sinner back. In this context, he might among other things invite revolutionaries to return to the fold. “Covering a multitude of sins” comes from Proverbs 10:12. In that text, it probably refers to not spreading a bad report (cf. 11:13; 20:19), but Judaism often used similar phrases for securing forgiveness. One may compare the Jewish idea that one who converted another to the practice of Judaism was as if he or she had created that person.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “[Healing the Sick](#),” April Conference, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, [Doctrinal New Testament Commentary](#), 3 vols., Bookcraft, 1966, 1:179.

<sup>45</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 683.