

JAMES

Introduction

The author of this letter introduces himself as ‘James’ (Greek: Iakobos , 1:1). Since Jacob, also called Israel, was the father of the twelve patriarchs, his was a common Jewish name, then as now. There are a number of men called James mentioned in the New Testament, including two in the list of the Twelve. One is listed as ‘James the son of Zebedee’ (Mark 3:17). He was killed with the sword during the reign of Herod Agrippa I (41-44AD; see Acts 12:2) and is not the author of our letter. The other is listed as ‘James the son of Alphaeus’ (Mark 3:18) and there is no reason to associate him with our letter either.

A third James is named along with Joses, Simon and Jude as a brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). We should note immediately that the word ‘brother’ does not define the exact nature of his relationship to Jesus. As in many cultures today in which the extended family, as distinct from the nuclear family, is the unit, the word ‘brother’ can refer not only to someone who has the same mother and father but also to a half-brother, a step-brother or a cousin. This same James along with his brother Joses is mentioned as being the son of one of the women present at the crucifixion, a woman called Mary (Mark 15:40). Mark can hardly be referring to Mary the mother of Jesus or he would surely have identified her as such. After all the whole scene is about Jesus, not James. This could be the Mary identified by John as ‘the wife of Clopas’ (John 19:25). In his *History of the Church* (3.11), Eusebius quotes Hegessipus (middle second century) as stating that Clopas was the brother of Jesus’ father, Joseph, which would make James Jesus’ first cousin. Could he be the James who composed our letter?

Origen, writing early in the third century, identifies the author of the Letter of James as ‘James the brother of the Lord’ (*Letter to the Romans* 4.8). This identification is traditional and no persuasive reasons have been advanced to contradict it. As will be demonstrated shortly, we know quite a bit about this James. However it is by no means certain that he is to be identified as the ‘brother’ mentioned above. The brother referred to by Mark is identified as ‘James the younger’ (Mark 15:40). He may be doing this to distinguish this ‘brother’ from the more well-known ‘brother’, also called James, and identified by Eusebius as a son, not of Clopas, but of Joseph (HE 2.1). The weight of evidence favours this fourth James as the author of our letter. One tradition is that he was not a son of Mary but of Joseph by a previous marriage.

Paul tells us that the risen Jesus appeared to James (1Corinthians 15:7). Paul saw him on his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (37AD, Galatians 1:19). In c.44AD he is singled out as the one who should be informed about Peter’s miraculous rescue from prison (Acts 12:17). He is mentioned along with Cephas and John as acknowledging the mission given to Paul (Galatians 2:9). In c.48AD a group of Christians from Jerusalem go to Antioch ‘from James’ (Galatians 2:12) and debate with Paul about the necessity of circumcision. He is the leading presbyter in the Jerusalem community (Acts 15:12-21). In 57AD Paul arrives in Jerusalem where he goes ‘to visit James; and all the elders were present’ (Acts 21:18). He was martyred in 62AD in the interregnum between the Roman governors Festus and Albinus. His death is recorded by Josephus (*Antiquities*, 20.9.1) and by Eusebius who quotes Clement of Alexandria (HE 2.1) and Hegessipus (HE 2.23). It is unclear whether he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple or was stoned and clubbed to death under orders of the high priest, Ananus II.

The letter reveals someone who is a competent writer of Greek. He also quotes from the Greek and not the Hebrew Bible. Both these facts were once considered arguments against the author being from Palestine. However it has been established that the Greek language was well and truly at home in the Palestine of the first century AD, and had been for some time. There is no reason why an intelligent, missionary-minded Jew from Nazareth could not have mastered Greek to the extent of being able to compose this letter.

The aim of the letter is not to reinforce teaching about Jesus. James does not speak of the death of Jesus or of his resurrection or of the gift of the Holy Spirit. His purpose in writing is to encourage his readers to put into practice the faith which they profess. As a devout Jew, his focus, like that of his brother Jesus, is on God. He is reinforcing Jesus' teaching about God and especially about how we are to respond to God.

The 'law' (Greek: *nomos*) is important to him, as it is to the prophets and to Jesus himself, as a revelation of God and of how we are to respond to God's covenant of love. His interest is moral, however, not cultic. We will find no mention of circumcision, or special liturgical celebrations, or regulations concerning food. His concern, as far as this letter goes, is for the authenticity of our response to God as demonstrated in our behaviour. He draws on the Torah for its moral teaching, and also for the example of Abraham and of others whose lives are recorded in it. He draws also, as we shall see, on the writings of the prophets, especially as regards loyalty to the covenant, the place of suffering in our lives, and in his condemnation of injustice. Concerned as he is with our behaviour, we should not be surprised that he draws heavily on the Wisdom literature as well.

At the time of the Reformation, the letter of James, was dragged into the unfortunate, and now superseded, debate about the relationship between faith and human behaviour ('works'). On both sides, Paul and James were read through ideological filters with the result that both were distorted to fit the argument. Once we step outside that debate, and read James as well as Paul and the Acts for what they say, we discover (perhaps to our surprise) that there is no evidence in the New Testament of any antipathy or theological difference between Paul and James. There is no evidence in Paul. There is no evidence in Acts, and there is no evidence in James. James's focus is quite specific and we have only this one letter to draw on. Paul, on the other hand, has thirteen letters that claim him as their author, and his writing covers over fifteen years of missionary endeavour in a number of diverse situations. Within the specific area covered by James, however, we will find remarkable agreement between his teaching and that of Paul.

A comparison with much of the teaching of the moralists of the Greco-Roman world of the first century casts into relief the Jewish-Christian perspective of our author. It also reveals that he is not interested, as they sometimes were, in educating his readers to conformity with the social mores of the society of the day. Quite the contrary. His key point is that his readers must make a choice which, in many ways, will mean a rejection of the morals of the 'world' - a term that always has negative connotations in James. Nor is James composing a sectarian document aiming to defend Christians. He is frequently critical of members of the community who fail to live according to the faith which they profess.

Structure

That he is addressing Jewish Christians is indicated in his opening address ‘to the twelve tribes in the dispersion’(1:1), by the fact that they assemble in a ‘synagogue’(2:2), and that he makes no attempt to correct the kind of immoral behaviour which Jews considered typical of Gentiles. It may be that this is a circular letter intended for the communities evangelised as a result of missionary activity from Jerusalem. He is exhorting his readers to live as faithful Jews according to the teaching of Jesus. They are to do so even though this involves suffering.

The complete text is preserved in the fourth century parchment codexes Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, and in the fifth century Codex Alexandrinus. Parts of chapter one (1:10-12, 15-18) are extant in a third century papyrus manuscript (P²³), and another papyrus manuscript, also from the third century (P²⁰), contains 2:19 - 3:9.

Structure of James

Address and greeting	1:1
Part One. Summary of themes	
Seek in prayer the grace to endure	1:2-8
Blessed are the poor	1:9-12
Welcoming God’s gift	1:13-21
Doing God’s will means caring for the poor	1:22-27
Part Two. Deeds of Faith	
Do not favour people on the basis of their wealth	2:1-7
The royal law of love	2:8-13
True faith must express itself in action	2:14-26
Part Three. Our words reveal our soul	3:1-12
Part Four. Conversion	
The need for conversion	3:13 - 4:6
The call to conversion	4:7-10
Part Five. Examples of Arrogance	4:11 - 5:6
Part Six. Patience in time of testing	5:7-11
Part Seven. Speech in the Assembly of Believers	5:12-20

Lectionary Readings

	1:1-11	Monday of 6th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	1:12-18	Tuesday of 6th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	1:19-27	Wednesday of 6th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
1:17-18, 21-22, 27		22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
2:1-5		23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
	2:1-9	Thursday of 6th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	2:10-13	not in Sunday or weekday lectionary
2:14-18		24th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
	2:14-24,26	Friday of 6th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	2:25	not in Sunday or weekday lectionary
	3:1-10	Saturday of 6th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	3:11-12	not in Sunday or weekday lectionary
	3:13-18	Monday of 7th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
3:16 - 4:3		25th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
	4:1-10	Tuesday of 7th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	4:11-12	not in Sunday or weekday lectionary
	4:13-17	Wednesday of 7th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
5:1-6		26th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
	5:1-6	Thursday of 7th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
5:7-10		3rd Sunday of Advent, Year A
	5:9-12	Friday of 7th week of Ordinary Time, Year II
	5:13-20	Saturday of 7th week of Ordinary Time, Year II

**¹James, a slave
[NRSV 'servant']
of God and of the
Lord Jesus Christ**

As stated in the Introduction the author is probably the James who was known as 'the brother of the Lord' (Galatians 1:19), the leader among the presbyters of the Jerusalem church. In identifying himself as 'slave (Greek: *doulos*) of God' – an expression used also by Paul (Titus 1:1) – he is acknowledging God as his Lord to whom he owes complete obedience. He is also making a claim, though a humble one, to authority, for Abraham also was known as the slave of the Lord (Psalm 105:42), as was Moses (2Kings 18:12), Joshua (Judges 2:8), and David (2Samuel 7:5). We can also see a reference to the suffering servant (that is, 'slave') of the Lord who is portrayed in the poetry of the anonymous prophet of the exile (see Isaiah 42:1). James wants his readers to receive his word as coming from God.

He goes on to speak of himself as 'a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ'. Paul also speaks of himself as a 'slave of Christ' (Galatians 1:10; Romans 1:1). The obedience which James gives to God is expressed through his obedience to Jesus, who, being acknowledged by the Jewish Christians as the longed for Messiah, is called 'Christ'. Jesus is also called 'Lord' (Greek: *kurios*), a title which has a range of meanings. As a title of respect Jesus is addressed in this way a number of times in the Gospel (see Luke 5:12; 6:46; 9:54; 10:17; 22:33). It is used in the Jewish scriptures also as a title of the king when the focus is on the power of God which the king wields, as distinct from his communion with God through being anointed as the 'Christ'. When James calls Jesus 'Lord', he is referring to him as the Messiah raised to glory.

However, of even greater significance is the fact that the title 'Lord' translates the Greek *kurios* which in turn translates the sacred name Yahweh – the name by which God introduces himself to Moses when he appears in the burning bush and commissions Moses to go back to Egypt to liberate the Hebrews from slavery (Exodus 3:13-15). It is this mysterious and divine aspect to which James is referring here in identifying this 'Lord' as Jesus, the risen and exalted Christ. To have God's name is to exercise God's power (see Exodus 23:20-21). James is claiming that in exercising kingly power, Jesus is the one through whom God has chosen to save.

There are good reasons for regarding this letter as a circular letter addressed principally to Jewish-Christian communities, probably those founded by missionaries from Jerusalem. In referring to them as ‘the twelve tribes of the Dispersion’ (Greek: diaspora), James (Greek: Iacōbos) is playing with his own name, since Jacob was the ‘father of the twelve patriarchs’ (Acts 7:8) after whom the tribes are named. He is also giving expression to a self-understanding found among the first Jewish Christians that in the Christian church God was fulfilling his long-standing promise to restore the scattered tribes of Israel (compare 1 Peter 1:1). Three times in the Acts, Christians outside Judea are referred to as those who have been ‘dispersed’ (Greek: diaspeirō, Acts 8:1,4; 11:19).

The simple salutation ‘Greetings’ (Greek: chairein) is typical of letters of the day (compare Acts 15:23; 23:26).

His first words provide a key to his purpose in writing. Being a Christian in the world is not easy, and there is an obvious temptation to compromise so as to be more acceptable to one’s neighbours. As the letter unfolds it will emerge that James is reminding them that they must not compromise their faith. In choosing to follow Christ, they must necessarily choose against following the way of the ‘world’ (1:27). He wants them to reflect on the fact that by remaining faithful when it is difficult they are demonstrating the reality of their faith. Their endurance is a cause for rejoicing. Because of the central importance of ‘faith’ in this letter, we should pause here to reflect on how it was understood by those brought up in the Jewish religion.

Faith (Greek: pistis) and ‘believing’ (Greek: pisteuō) speak of listening to God, heeding God’s inspiration, and acting accordingly. The verb especially focuses on the dynamic movement of our actual relating with God. Far from being a speculative, cerebral thing, faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action. As Jesus himself says:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

**^{1b}To the twelve tribes
in the Dispersion:**

Greetings.

**²My brothers and
sisters, whenever you
face trials of any kind,
consider it nothing
but joy,**

**³because you know
that the testing of
your faith produces
endurance**

Faith

To speak of 'faith' is to speak of the truth about God's self-revelation through his activity in the world, reaching its climax in God's self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

When we examine the meaning of belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that while belief is impossible without trust, biblical usage is against identifying belief with trust. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek verb *pisteuō* or by the related noun *pistis*, or adjective *pistos*. These latter only ever translate words from the Hebrew root 'mn. The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated 'faithfulness'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, certain, and so trustworthy (note, *trustworthy* - which is not the same as *trusting*).

God has this quality in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the *real* God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God.

The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*.

– Psalm 33:4

I will take you for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:20

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are *trustworthy* because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of the Lord, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18). Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

When we come to the Hebrew verb 'mn we find, as we would expect, that it means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness. The verb 'believe' then has two essential components. It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness and to give evidence of this by behaving faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

When we say that God is 'faith-full', we are saying that God always acts according to who God is. But who is God? Among the many necessarily imperfect answers to this question found in the sacred Scriptures, there is one that stands out: God is the one who hears the cry of the poor. When God first appears to Moses, God declares:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

Exodus 3:7-8

Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.'

– Exodus 6:6-7

This loving kindness of God is stressed throughout the Old Testament. It finds its most sublime expression in the New Testament in the First Letter of John where we read: 'God is love' (1John 4:8,16). Since God *is* love, God can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

To believe in God, therefore, is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'

– Psalm 82:1-4

Jeremiah challenges king Zedekiah:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? ...
He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well.
Is not this to know me? says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 22:15-16

King Josiah, Zedekiah's father, acted justly and so can truly be said to have put his faith in the faithfulness of God. The idea recurs again and again in the writings of the prophets:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

– Amos 5:24

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.

– Hosea 4:1

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

– Hosea 6:6

Faith

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

– Isaiah 11:9

The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor. They are to remember that they were once oppressed and that it was the Lord who redeemed them. The following text is typical and similar injunctions can be found throughout the books of the Law:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.

– Exodus 22:21-23

In the New Testament – and it is to this point that we must return – Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures who are totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to 'be' - 'lieve', to 'be' in 'love'. It is to be in God's love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts. To have faith is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion. To believe is:

- to listen to God's word as revealed in Jesus.
- to heed what God says, trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts and minds, our soul and strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus, sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accordance with God's will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love.

As we shall see, James is especially concerned that our claims to faith are real, and to point out that if our faith is real it will certainly be fruitful in deeds of love.

Jesus once said: ‘the tree is known by its fruit’ (Matthew 12:33). This is a key theme in this letter. James has already introduced the idea in verse three by speaking of endurance as something ‘produced’ (Greek: katergazomai by trials that are undergone faithfully. It is reinforced here in verse four when he urges his readers to ‘let endurance have its full effect’ – literally, its ‘perfect work’ (Greek: ergon teleion). If you do this, says James, you yourself will be ‘mature’ (teleion, ‘perfect’). Again, we recall Jesus’ words: ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). We will see that James has the same idea of what it means to be perfect as we find in Jesus: faith bearing fruit in love. Paul, too, can write: ‘the only thing that counts is faith working (Greek: energeō) through love’ (Galatians 5:6), till we are ‘perfect to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:13).

The Book of Wisdom addresses God, acknowledging that ‘even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you’ (Wisdom 9:6). Solomon begged God for this wisdom (see 1Kings 3:5-15): ‘I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me’ (Wisdom 7:7). James’s advice is the same. If we lack the kind of wisdom to discern what is best, there is only one place to turn: we must turn towards God in prayer, for God ‘gives to all generously and ungrudgingly’ (see also 1:17;4:6). Once more we are reminded of the words of Jesus: ‘Ask, and it will be given you ... for everyone who asks receives’ (Matthew 7:7-8). James is clear here, and throughout his letter, on the obvious truth that of ourselves we cannot produce the fruit of true faith. God is the source of all good. We must turn to God and ask with what he calls later the ‘prayer of faith’ (5:15).

Jesus told us to turn to God in prayer and not to ‘doubt in your heart’ (Mark 11:23). We must put our faith in God’s wisdom and God’s care for us, knowing that whatever we need to become ‘perfect’, whatever we need to enjoy full communion in life with God, God will readily grant us, to the extent that we are open to receive. If we are ‘double-minded’ (Greek: dipsuchos ‘divided soul’), however, though God will not cease offering love, we will be unable to receive it. We cannot avoid the choice between God and ‘the world’ (see 4:4,8).

⁴and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

⁶But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind;

^{7,8}for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

[note: because of the structure of Greek and Latin which sometimes place the subject at the end of the sentence, ‘must not expect to receive anything from the Lord’ is numbered verse seven in the Greek New Testament and in the Latin Vulgate, and ‘the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way’ is verse eight].

Blessed are the poor

**9Let the believer
who is lowly boast
in being raised up**

It is reliance on God that defines a person as ‘lowly’ (Greek: □□□□□□□□). And it is this openness to receive from God that causes the lowly to be ‘raised up’, by God, and to God. As James says later, quoting Proverbs: ‘God gives grace to the lowly’ (4:6). The teaching is traditional as James’s readers would know from their psalms: ‘Lord, you do justice for the orphan and the lowly’ (Psalm 10:18). ‘You deliver a lowly people, but the haughty eyes you bring down’ (Psalm 18:27). ‘The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the lowly in spirit’ (Psalm 34:18). Isaiah writes: ‘with righteousness he shall judge the lowly’ (Isaiah 11:4). What matters is our relationship to God.

If we are among the lowly, let us ‘boast’ of this, that is to say, let us speak of the wonders that God has done for us and invite others to join us in praising God, for it is God who is showering his gifts on us. James is repeating the teaching of Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 9:23-24

Paul has the same teaching when, referring to the above statement in Jeremiah, he writes: ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1Corinthians 1:31 and 2Corinthians 10:17). In a text that parallels James’s thought here and earlier in verse three, Paul writes: ‘we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance’ (Romans 5:3).

Addressing himself to those in the community who are rich in this world's goods, James tells them to thank God when they are brought low, for then they will learn to rely on God and so will be open to the gifts that alone count. He is making the same contrast as Isaiah: 'The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever' (Isaiah 40:7-8).

Our real need is to hear the word of God, calling us into communion, for, as he will say shortly, it is this word 'that has the power to save your souls' (1:21). James's attitude to riches echoes the oft repeated teaching of Jesus: 'I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (Matthew 19:24). 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation' (Luke 6:24). James will return to this topic a number of times later in the letter. His stressing the importance of their being among the lowly and not the rich recalls one of Jesus' maxims: 'All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted' (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14). The following parable of Jesus is pertinent:

Jesus told them a parable: The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

– Luke 12:16-20

When James spoke earlier of remaining true to their faith under trial, he spoke of the 'joy' that should be theirs (1:2). Returning to the subject he explains what this joy is: it is the joy promised by Jesus: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven' (Matthew 5:11-12). 'You will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved' (Matthew 10:22). Paul speaks of 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9).

¹⁰and [let] the rich [boast] in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field.

¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

¹²Blessed is anyone who endures temptation [‘trial’]. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

¹³No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.

¹⁴But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it;

¹⁵then, when that desire has conceived, it is sin that it bears [NRSV 'it gives birth to sin'], and when sin has reached full term [NRSV 'and that sin, when it is fully grown'], it gives birth to death.

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved. ¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with 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 will not let us avoid responsibility by blaming everything on God. The point of view which he rejects would go something like this: 'Nothing happens without God's will, so if I am undergoing some trial, even if I find myself inclined to something that is evil, it must be God's will. God must be permitting it for some reason'. The God revealed by Jesus does not control the world. God loves the world. Many things happen without God's will; they are done sinfully, against God's will. This does not mean that God is not involved in the world, or that God is a victim of bad human choices, or that God is powerless to help. Absolutely the contrary. James has already portrayed God as hearing the cry of the poor. When it comes to evil, however, this is something that is never will by God:

Do not say, 'It was the Lord's doing that I fell away';
for he does not do what he hates.
Do not say, 'It was he who led me astray';
for he has no need of the sinful.

– Sirach 15:11-12

It is significant that James does not escape, or allow us to escape, by blaming temptation upon the devil or some other outside agent. 'One is tempted by one's own desire' (see 4:1-3). In a powerful and rather horrifying metaphor, James portrays desire as conceiving sin, and when sin reaches its full term, desire gives birth to death. God is not behind any of this. When the sun or moon change, as they do, shadows form and alter. Not so with God, the creator. God does not change. God is our 'Father' and everything that comes from God is 'generous', and 'perfect'.

When Jesus addressed God as Father ('Abba'), people must have been startled by his use of such a familiar and affectionate term. He was, after all, addressing the Almighty and Transcendent Deity. And yet he was speaking to God as a child speaks to a father. Jesus said that we have to become like little children if we are to share in his familiarity with God (Matthew 18:3). He asked people to trust this God who cares for us (Matthew 6:25-34), and to address God in prayer with that simplest and most trusting of words (Matthew 6:9). Jesus was attempting to bring home the amazing truth of God's close and constant love. In referring to God as 'Father' James wants us to remember that God is the source of life – for his Son Jesus, and for all who share with Jesus the life of the Spirit.

Having referred to God as ‘Father’, James now speaks of God as mother. Using the same feminine image for God that he has just used for desire, James assures us that when we, the Christian community, were born from the womb of God, in fulfilment of God’s divine purpose, it was because of the life which we had received from ‘the word of truth’. We find a similar mixture of male and female images of God in the words of Jesus as recorded in Luke’s Gospel: ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36). The word *oiktirmōn* (‘merciful’) is used in the Greek Bible to translate the Hebrew *rḥm*, a word that is related to the Hebrew word for ‘womb’. God is seen as caring for us the way a mother cares for the child in her womb.

The word of ‘truth’ (Greek: *alētheia*) of which James speaks is the word that comes from the God of truth. It is the word that reveals the truth about God and about who we are in relation to God. It is the word of the one who is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14:6). It is what Paul calls ‘the word of the truth, the gospel’ (Colossians 1:5; see 2 Timothy 2:15).

When you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

– Ephesians 1:13

The first to live the life of communion with God enjoyed by the risen and glorious Christ, we are those whom God intended to be ‘the first fruits of his creatures’, chosen by God ‘as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth’ (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

¹⁸In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

James is still focusing on productivity, and on the productivity that has its origin in God. It is necessary that our lives 'produce (Greek: $\square\square\square\square\square\square\square\square$) God's righteousness'. There is no righteousness that is not God's. If we are going to open ourselves to the perfect gift of our Father-Mother God, we must listen to 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3). God has already planted his word in our souls. It is 'very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe' (Deuteronomy 30:14). It is this 'implanted word that has the power to save your souls' (1:21).

There is nothing subtle about James's treatment of anger. There is an appropriate anger which assists us in defending ourselves or others against unjust aggression. James is not speaking of this. Rather, in line with tradition, he is referring to the unreasonable and spiteful passion that can come over us when we fail to get our own way or have our own whims gratified. The words of Qohelet, the Preacher, are pertinent: 'Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools' (Ecclesiastes 7:9). When in the grip of this kind of anger the last thing we can do is listen. The energy of the anger comes from our own disturbed soul. 'Your anger', says James, 'does not produce God's righteousness'.

The noun 'righteousness' (Greek: *dikaiosunē*) and the verb 'to make right', or 'to declare right' (Greek: *dikaioō*) are based in Greek on a word which refers to divine order (Greek: *dikē*) – the will of God as revealed in nature, in history, and in divinely revealed law. God's will has been revealed in Jesus. God will *declare* us to be in accordance with his purpose only if this be, indeed, the case. For this to happen we sinners need to open ourselves to grace and to allow God to *make* us 'right'. James is saying that 'anger', deriving its energy and motivation from our own ego, will not bring this about. The only way for us to receive the righteousness that has its source in God is to share in the righteousness of Jesus by living in communion with him. We must allow God's word to purify us.

As Paul insists, it is God's will that 'in Christ we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21). James's thought here fits well with Paul's statement that 'in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed through faith' (Romans 1:17).

Just as at baptism we cast off our old clothing and were clothed in white as a symbol of the new life that we were entering, so we must cast aside all immoral behaviour. James's imagery reminds us of the powerful scene recorded by Zechariah:

Joshua was dressed with filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.' And to him he said, 'See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you with festal apparel.'

– Zechariah 3:3-4

It is not enough to 'lay aside the works of darkness' (Romans 13:12). We must 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 13:14). We cannot put on Christ ourselves. This is something we must receive from the one who plants his word in our souls. For James, as for Paul, all is gift. From our side we must welcome God's gift, we must 'believe'. As Paul says: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Jesus spoke of those who hear the word, but because the word is ‘choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, their fruit does not mature’ (Luke 8:14). He spoke also of those who claim faith by calling on him, but added: ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21). The point hardly needs explaining, and is echoed by Paul: ‘it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified’ (Romans 2:13). Those who live Jesus’ life, his ‘brothers and sisters’, are those who ‘hear the word of God and do it’ (Luke 8:21).

Sometimes we glance at a mirror (polished bronze) so casually that when we walk away we forget what we saw. It can be like that when we look at ourselves. We take momentary glimpses, but soon forget what it means to be a human being. Now comes James’s first use of the word ‘law’ (Greek: *nomos*). For a Jew like Jesus or Paul or James, this word is sacred for it speaks of God’s self-revelation, of God’s redeeming action, of the covenant, and of God’s revelation of how we are to respond in love to God’s initiative. It is not sufficient to give it a passing glance. We must ‘look into’ the law, gaze into it, for it comes from God as one of God’s ‘perfect gifts’ (1:17). It is a revelation of God as redeemer and so is ‘the law of liberty’ (see 2:8-12; 4:11-12). It is only by doing the will of God that we will experience true freedom and the promised ‘blessing’.

Paul, too, declares that ‘the law is holy’ (Romans 7:12), that ‘the law is spiritual’ (Romans 7:14), that ‘the law is good’ (Romans 7:16). Like James, he is echoing something of the delight of the Psalmist:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

– Psalm 19:7-10

James is thinking of the law as lived and taught by Jesus. Likewise, Paul (see Galatians 5:1; 2Corinthians 3:18).

If we claim to be ‘religious’ (Greek: ἅγιος ἅγιος = one who reveres God), we must show this by what we *do*. James looks at the way we live, and, in the tradition of the prophets, his focus is not on religious cult. He firstly warns his readers of the need to exercise control over their speech. It is rather like his earlier warning against anger (see 1:19). Like anger, uncontrolled speech is the enemy of the kind of humble listening on which he is insisting. It is another symptom of behaviour that finds its origin not in God but in the desire that ‘deceives the heart’ by luring a person away from God’s word. Its only fruit is sin and its only outcome is death (see 1:14-15). We read in Sirach: ‘the tongue of mortals may be their downfall’ (Sirach 5:13). The advice of the preacher, too, is pertinent: ‘Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few’ (Ecclesiastes 5:2). It is a topic to which James will return later in the letter (3:1-12).

It is God’s ‘implanted word’ that alone purifies the heart. Religious practice (Greek: *thrēskeia*, see also Acts 26:5) that is ‘pure’ and ‘undefiled’ involves two things. On the positive side it consists in ‘care for orphans and widows’ (see also 2:14-16). Isaiah has the same message:

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

– Isaiah 1:17

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.

– Isaiah 1:23

We read in the Wisdom literature: ‘Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy’ (Proverbs 31:9). ‘Help the poor for the commandment’s sake, and in their need do not send them away empty-handed’ (Sirach 29:9).

On the negative side true religious practice consists in keeping oneself unstained by the ‘world’. This is James’s first use of ‘world’. It always has negative connotations for him (see 2:5; 3:6). He means by it the world as closed to and in opposition to the ‘implanted word’. James’s main thesis is that his Jewish Christian readers must choose between being faithful to Judaism as lived and taught by Jesus and living according to the values of the world around them. No compromise is possible, however much their choice puts them in conflict with society and causes them to experience trials and persecution: ‘Friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God’ (4:4).

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:

to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really have the faith of [NRSV 'believe in'] our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,

³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,'

⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Verse one sets the tone for all of chapter two. James is concerned to point out what it means to 'really believe' in the one whom, as Christians, they claim as the 'Lord', namely, the exalted, glorious Messiah, Jesus. To understand James we need to grasp what he means by our having the *pistis* *Iēsou*. This is a simple genitive in Greek. Of itself it does no more than place one reality in relationship with another; in this case, 'faith' and 'Jesus'. They can be related in a number of different ways. If we think in terms of something which *we* are supposed to do, we will think of the faith which we should have in relation to Jesus. Important as this is, this is not James's central focus, and so the translation given in the NRSV, though common, points us in the wrong direction.

He wants us to think first of what God revealed in revealing Jesus, his Son. He wants our minds and hearts to go straight to Jesus' faith: his trust in God, his obedience, his fidelity, shown especially when he gave himself in obedience to his Father and out of love for us. The faith which we are to have in God is a gift which Jesus gives us in giving us a share in his life. It is a faith which we receive from God, before it is a faith which we offer God as a response. James is concerned throughout the letter that our faith be real. Here he is telling us that for this to be so we must have the faith which Jesus has and which Jesus shares with us. We cannot achieve this faith. It is a gift from the heart of Jesus of his own obedient trust in God his Father. Only this faith will produce the fruit of love.

To appreciate the kind of faith that Jesus had, we must look at how he lived and listen to his teaching. It is clear, says James, that Jesus did not treat people according to their position in society, their wealth or their ability to return his favours. Even the scribes and the leading priests had to admit that: 'Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth' (Luke 20:21). Paul expresses traditional teaching when he declares: 'God shows no partiality' (Galatians 2:6), and Sirach warns of the dangers facing human judges: 'you may be partial to the powerful, and so mar your integrity' (Sirach 7:6). Verses two to four give us obvious examples of what not to do. To behave like this in the 'assembly' (Greek: $\sigma\upsilon\nu\alpha\gamma\omicron\gamma\omicron\gamma\epsilon$, 'synagogue') is certainly not to have the faith of Jesus.

Though many religions contemporary with Judaism acknowledged mercy as a quality of the divinity, it was normal to think of god as favouring the powerful. That is why they are powerful. Because of their origins among the enslaved peoples of Egypt, the religion of Israel had an inbuilt corrective against such a view. It recognised God's special regard for those suffering oppression and required similar behaviour from its adherents: 'You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Deuteronomy 10:19). God is the one who hears the cry of the poor. The poor, like the rich, will be judged impartially according to their deeds. God special care for the poor, however, highlights God's compassion, and it also emphasises the fact that it is the oppressed who, knowing their need, cry out to God and are open to God's response. The temptation of the rich, besides the temptation to use their wealth to oppress others, is that they will think that they can provide their own security. As James has already said, it is only when they are brought down that they might recognise their need and cry out for God's merciful response. It is against this background that James speaks of God's choice of the poor. As we read in the Torah:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you.

– Deuteronomy 7:7-8

James's comment reminds us of a similar statement by Paul: 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are' (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). Real riches, says James, are not material ones. They are fickle and passing (see 1:10-11). That person is truly rich who is 'raised up' (1:9) with Jesus and who shares his faith. They are heirs, not to the empty promises of this world but to the 'kingdom that he has promised to those who love him'. This is the 'crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him' (1:12). As the Psalmist says, God is our inheritance: 'The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup' (Psalm 16:5). James is echoing the words of his brother, Jesus: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20).

⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

To dishonour the poor is blasphemy

6But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?

7Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

Paul gives an example of the community dishonouring the poor when he corrects the rich in Corinth who were gathering at the weekly assembly and enjoying a good meal among themselves while the poor watched but were not invited to share: 'What!', says Paul, 'Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?' (1 Corinthians 11:22).

James points out the obvious foolishness of Christians showing special honour to the rich members of the community and taking their word against that of the poor in matters of community dispute. In the world in which they live is it not the rich who oppress the poor, and do they not use the law as an instrument of this oppression? This is a theme frequently taken up by the prophets who are especially critical of injustice that hides behind the law which it uses to make itself look just. Amos is especially trenchant, though by no means alone, in his criticism of the behaviour of those who 'trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land' (Amos 8:4).

Listen to Jeremiah: 'Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow' (Jeremiah 22:3). And Ezekiel: 'the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you' (Ezekiel 22:7). Zechariah warns: 'do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor' (Zechariah 7:10).

Paul quotes the words of Isaiah against those who claim the Lord as their God but who fail to carry out God's will: 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you' (Romans 2:24, quoting Isaiah 52:5). James is making the same point. When the Christians whom he addressing were baptised 'the excellent name' of Jesus 'was invoked over you'. They claim to believe in Jesus. If, in spite of this, they do not share 'the faith of Jesus', if, in other words their behaviour contradicts their claim, they give Christianity and so Christ a bad name.

The 'royal law' is the law of the 'kingdom' just mentioned (2:5). It is a law of love of one's neighbour, found in their Scriptures. This is the third time James has spoken of love. On both previous occasions he was speaking of our love for God. He spoke of 'the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him'(1:12), and of our being 'heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him'(2:5). Here it is our neighbour who is the object of love. What is this 'love' of which James is speaking?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

(Leviticus 19:18)

John tells us that 'God is love'(1John 4:8). Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in his self-giving that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God's self-giving, a 'word' of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God's instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God's love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus' self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God's gift of self, to God's love.

The love of the heart of Jesus is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5). One of the central texts of the Torah reads: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'(Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the word 'love' in this text is translated in the Greek version by *agapaō*, James, like all the other New Testament authors, uses this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God, with our brothers and sisters in the Christian community, and with our neighbour.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. James sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and, thanks to this gift of grace, from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where we share in the same Spirit.

Christian love

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

Jesus' complete response can now harness for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for, just as we have Jesus' own faith that enables us to welcome God's love, so we have Jesus' own love to offer our brothers and sisters.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father, and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in the love which disciples have for one another and, indeed, for everyone. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has, which Jesus reveals, and which is given special emphasis by Jesus in his teaching (see Matthew 19:19; 22:39), but above all in the way he lived his life. The importance of this command of love is highlighted in the Gospel of John, where it is stressed that it is Jesus' own loving in which his disciples are to share. It is not that Jesus is an example who must be copied 'from the outside', as it were. Jesus' gives us his own Spirit so that it will be possible for us to love one another with his love:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

– John 13:34-35

Like James, Paul saw the central place of this command in the life of a Christian. He writes:

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

– Galatians 5:14

The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

– Romans 13:9

In verse nine, James alludes to the following text from Leviticus, which occurs in the same context as the command to love one's neighbour:

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour.

– Leviticus 19:15

Paul has the same teaching as James expresses in verse nine. He quotes Deuteronomy 27:26: 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law' (Galatians 3:10). Paul goes on to say: 'Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law' (Galatians 5:3).

James's point is that obedience is to the lawgiver not the law (see 4:12). Any disregard of any law shows a disregard for God and God's will. His examples 'adultery' and 'murder' are from the decalogue (Exodus 30:13-14). He follows the order of the Greek not the Hebrew Bible, as does Paul (see Romans 13:9).

⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹¹For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.

¹³For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy is confident in the face of judgment [NRSV ‘triumphs over judgment’].

Jesus has a parable about a slave who is unable to pay back an astronomical debt. He begs for mercy and his master cancels the debt. However, the slave is owed by a fellow slave a considerable amount, though the smallest fraction of what he owed his master. When, however, his fellow slave begs for mercy he is merciless and demands payment. The master summons him and says: ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger he hands him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. Jesus adds: ‘So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart’ (Matthew 18:23-35). Jesus is not suggesting that God has revenge on sinners by dealing out punishment, demonstrating who has the final say. Any punishment is self-inflicted, the effect of our sinful behaviour. God’s judgment is a statement of the way things truly are.

Pertinent also to what James says here is Jesus’ parable about the last judgment. If we fail to show mercy we will hear these words at the judgment:

You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

– Matthew 25:41-43

If, however, we show mercy, we will have nothing to fear at the judgment:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

– Matthew 25:34-36

James is in perfect tune with the words of Jesus: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’ (Matthew 5:7). ‘Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you’ (Matthew 5:42). ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven ... Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:44-45,48).

It is God who saves, and, as James has already reminded his Christian readers, God has done so by ‘giving us birth by the word of truth’(1:18). This gift of life is not something automatic; nor it is forced upon us. It is a gift from love, and we are free to open our hearts to receive it, or to reject it. If, trusting in God’s love, we open ourselves in faith to God’s gift, we will experience life, and salvation. But, says James, this is not a matter of words. Faith must be real, and if it is real it will bear the fruit of faith which is a life inspired by grace. As James said earlier, we must be ‘doers of the word’(1:22).

James’ words recall Jesus’ parable about the last judgment, just quoted. The teaching is traditional:

My child, do not cheat the poor of their living, and do not keep needy eyes waiting. Do not grieve the hungry, or anger one in need. Do not add to the troubles of the desperate, or delay giving to the needy. Do not reject a suppliant in distress, or turn your face away from the poor. Do not avert your eye from the needy, and give no one reason to curse you; for if in bitterness of soul some should curse you, their Creator will hear their prayer.

– Sirach 4:1-6

James’s words recall also Jesus’ response to the Jewish leaders who claimed to be children of Abraham: ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did’(John 8:39).

True faith, as we saw earlier (see the commentary on 1:3), includes obedience, and, like a living tree, bears the fruit of faith. James is speaking about a ‘claimed’ faith, and he is making the point that the prophets, Jesus himself, and Paul, make: if we truly place our trust in God we will be faithful to the covenant, and our faith will be demonstrated by our lives. To quote Paul, once again: ‘the only thing that counts is faith’ - and he adds immediately ‘faith working through love’(Galatians 5:6). Any other so-called ‘faith’ is not real. As Jesus says: ‘the tree is known by its fruit’(Matthew 12:33). A tree that is not bearing fruit is cut down (see Luke 13:7). It is dead.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?

¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,

¹⁶and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.

²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?

James plays the role of the school master, and has one of the students bring up an objection to what he has just said. The point of the objection seems to be that it is quite possible for one person to be able to point to his faith and for another person to be able to point to his deeds. They are not the same thing and can exist separately. Not so, says James. The person who points to his deeds demonstrates that, in fact, he has faith, and the person who points to his faith, if he has no deeds to show, demonstrates that his faith is not real. James could have repeated here his earlier remark: 'Do not be deceived, my beloved'(1:16).

As an example of the kind of false faith of which he is speaking, he goes to the central doctrine of the Jewish faith: 'God is one': 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone'(Deuteronomy 6:4). Is it faith, real faith, to make this assertion? Obviously not, says James, since even the demons can agree. Their lives, however, characterised as they are by a complete failure to live in a way that is consonant with this truth, show that the words are mere words.

James then turns to the Torah to demonstrate what is, as he expresses it, a self-evident fact: 'faith without works (Greek: *ergon*) is barren (Greek: *argos* = a + *ergon*)'; 'faith without deeds is without deeds'. It is unproductive, dead. The remarkable similarity *in words* between this statement and the following thesis defended by Paul is part of the reason for the widespread, but baseless, view that James and Paul are in disagreement here. Paul states: 'we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law'(Romans 3:28; see Galatians 2:16). Paul is arguing against the view that what puts us in a right relationship with God is not faith but that we do what the law requires. It would follow from such a view that it is our initiative that matters, not God's, and that we can earn salvation by our behaviour. Whether anyone actually held such a view is another matter. Certainly it was not typical of orthodox Judaism. Paul's point is that it is God who draws us into communion with himself, and that the key response asked of us is faith. If we lack faith, all the deeds in the world cannot put us in communion with God.

As should be clear by now, James is not dealing with this question at all. He is not contrasting 'faith' with 'deeds of the law'. He is making the traditional contrast between a claimed faith that bears no fruit and a faith that bears fruit. The 'deeds' to which he is referring are precisely the 'deeds of faith'. All he has said so far should convince us that he sees the initiative as coming from God and not from us. He would be perfectly happy with Paul speaking of such deeds as 'fruits of the Spirit'(Galatians 5:22).

Paul, too, goes to the example of Abraham (see Galatians 3:6-9, 17-18). Since the promise was made to Abraham hundreds of years before the revelation of the law, it is clear that Abraham was not justified by observing works *of the law*!

The similarity in terminology and the use of the same example has led some to suggest that James is setting out to correct Paul, or at least the way Paul is being misrepresented. It is not impossible that others may have misrepresented Paul. Is there any teacher who has not been misrepresented? However, there is no need for such speculation. James is not saying that we are justified by observing the works of the law. He makes it perfectly clear that he is speaking about works *of faith*, deeds in which faith is 'active', in which it is 'brought to perfection'. What James is saying here is traditional. Faith, like wisdom, 'is vindicated by her deeds' (Matthew 11:19). It is no surprise that in writing to Jewish Christians he should look to Abraham as an example.

Like the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (see Hebrews 11:17-19), James goes to the classic scene in which the reality of Abraham's faith was put to the test. He had put his faith in God, and God has miraculously made the fulfilment of the promise possible through the conception and birth of Isaac. Yet now God seemed to be taking away the only means, the God-given means, by which the promise was to come about. The story is found in Genesis 22. Abraham was to have faith only in God, not in Isaac, not in the means that God had given. Put to the test, Abraham, by his deeds, demonstrated the reality of his faith. What was said of Abraham in Genesis 15:6 (quoted also by Paul in Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4:3) is demonstrated as true in Genesis 22. What Abraham did in obedience demonstrated that his faith was real – precisely the point James is making. The 'you see' in verses twenty-two and twenty-four reminds us of James's earlier image of the law as a mirror into which we are to gaze in order to discern the ways of God (see 1:22).

The story of Rahab is found in Joshua chapter two. She believed in the Lord (Joshua 2:11), demonstrated the reality of her faith by assisting Joshua (Joshua 2:16), and it was this real, alive, fruit-bearing faith that saved her (Joshua 2:13-14).

²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.

²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,'
(Genesis 15:6)

and he was called the friend of God.

²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?

²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Faith bearing fruit in love

‘Obedience from the heart’(Romans 6:17), the ‘obedience of faith’(Romans 1:5; 16:26) is an essential dimension of faith. This can be demonstrated from the Hebrew Scriptures, and is a truth insisted on, again and again, by Jesus himself. The point James is making is traditional. One could say, ‘obvious’. However John the Baptist felt the need to remind his contemporaries of it: ‘Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’(Matthew 3:8-9). It is clearly a temptation to us all to fall into the habit of repeating faith formulas without actually living what we proclaim. We are in danger of deceiving ourselves into thinking that what we proclaim is actually what we believe, even when our words do not bear fruit. The following words by John could easily have been written by James:

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

– 1John 3:17-18

It should not need saying that Paul is in complete agreement with James on the fruitfulness of a living faith. We have already quoted a number of times his statement that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’(Galatians 5:6). He pleads with the Romans: ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law’(Romans 13:8). When he thinks of the Thessalonians, he is moved to thank God for what he calls their ‘*work of faith* and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’(1Thessalonians 1:3). And again: ‘we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and *work of faith*’(2Thessalonians 1:11). Is it not Paul who says: ‘if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing’(1Corinthians 13:2); and ‘we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’(Ephesians 2:10)?

Speaking of the final judgment, Paul asserts that the reality of who we are (which includes the reality of our faith) will be tested by ‘what sort of work each has done’(1Corinthians 3:13). He says to the Galatians: ‘All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour’s work, will become a cause for pride’(Galatians 6:4). Of course what we do matters: ‘God will repay according to each one’s deeds’(Romans 2:6; see 2Corinthians 5:10). What Paul is strongly against is our thinking that we can earn communion with God by what we do. That James would heartily agree is clear from his insistence on the central importance of our ‘asking in faith’(1:6) from ‘God who gives to all generously’(1:5). ‘Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above’(1:17). It is God who ‘gave us birth’(1:18). The righteousness that we are to produce is ‘God’s righteousness’(1:20). It is God’s ‘implanted word’, not anything we might do from our own initiative, ‘that has the power to save your souls’(1:21). The kind of ‘doers’ that James is speaking about are ‘doers of the word’(1:22). It is God’s implanted word that bears fruit in our lives. This will require obedience which will be tested by the trials of life, but it is not our discipline that produces the deeds. They remain the fruit of God’s life in us. They are the ‘deeds of faith’. What matters is to be ‘rich in faith’(2:5), something that is God’s gift.

There is one area in which we must be especially careful to ensure that our deeds are informed by faith. That is the area of speech. Our speech is also a good barometer of our heart. James has already spoken of our tendency to justify our behaviour by saying that God is responsible (see 1:13). How often we hear: ‘God made me the way I am.’ Speech is used to flatter the rich (see 2:3-6). We say the right things to the poor while doing nothing to better their condition (see 2:16). We use the right formulas in claiming to believe while our actions belie our words (see 2:18). All we are doing is deceiving ourselves. Teachers have an extra responsibility of care not to deceive their students. We recall Jesus’ words against the hypocrisy of teachers:

Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.

– Luke 11:52

James’s teaching on the power of the tongue, the difficulty we have in controlling it, and how readily we sin in our speech, is traditional. Would anyone argue with him?

Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives;
those who open wide their lips come to ruin.

– Proverbs 13:3

Who will set a guard over my mouth, and an effective seal upon my lips, so that I may not fall because of them, and my tongue may not destroy me?

– Sirach 22:27

Curse the gossips and the double-tongued, for they destroy the peace of many. Slander has destroyed strong cities, and overturned the houses of the great.

– Sirach 28:13-14

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

Our words reveal our soul

^{5b}How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

We are reminded of the words of Sirach: ‘A hasty quarrel kindles a fire, and a hasty dispute sheds blood’ (Sirach 28:11). Sins of speech are ‘a world of iniquity’. They stain everything, ignite the fires of anger, dispute, murder and war, and poison relationships within the community. Jesus also links sins of speech with the fire of hell:

I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

– Matthew 5:22

James is saying that not only do sins in speech lead to hell, they have their origin there. He would apply to the tongue the following words of Jesus:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

– Matthew 18:18-19

Alluding to Genesis 1:26-28, James highlights the irony in our being told to exercise control over creation when we cannot even control our own tongue.

In verses nine to twelve he makes his main point. His key concern in this whole letter is that our faith be genuine. The test is in our deeds. We cannot believe in Jesus and behave in accordance with ‘the world’. If we are ‘double-minded’ (1:8), if our soul is divided, this will show in our behaviour, and nowhere more clearly than in our speech. It is ‘the word of truth’ that introduced us to the life of God (see 1:18), and it is the word implanted in our souls that has the power to save us (see 1:21). If in our words we speak ill of our brothers and sisters, if we detract from their character by telling others their faults, if we lie about them or spread rumours about them, how can we possibly think that our words are genuine when we mouth praises to the God who made them in his likeness?

James has focused on speech to demonstrate how lacking in perfection is our faith, and the need we have for conversion. Speech is only one area. We need to look at the whole complex of feelings, desires and attitudes that are revealed in our daily lives. Our behaviour will show how truly ‘wise and understanding’ we are. These words are coupled in the tradition (see, for example, Deuteronomy 1:13). Wisdom tends to focus on our openness to God’s word, for true wisdom comes only ‘from above’, and it on wisdom that James concentrates. The key test of wisdom, says James, is in that special ‘gentleness’ (Greek: *prautēs*) that is its fruit. This was translated ‘meekness’ earlier (see 1:21). It is a quality characteristic of the heart of Jesus (see Matthew 11:29).

James described the opposite of this gentleness in terms of a form of ‘zeal’ (Greek: *zēlos*). This energetic and determined pursuing of a goal can be a virtue or a vice, depending on the goal. If the goal is defence of justice or the acquiring of something good, it is a virtue, translated simply as ‘zeal’. On the other hand, if what is being defended is one’s own self-interest without regard for others or for the truth, or if what is being pursued is, as James adds, ‘selfish ambition’, it is the vice of jealousy. Paul, too, speaks of “those who are self-seeking and who do not obey the truth” (Romans 2:8). His advice to the Philippians is clear: ‘Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves’ (Philippians 2:3).

The ‘wisdom’ that goes with jealousy and selfish ambition, that is to say, the clever know-how of a person who is skilled in getting his or her own way, is not real wisdom, for that comes ‘from above’ (see 1:5, 17). On the contrary, it is earthbound; it is ‘unspiritual’ (Greek: *psuchikos*), in the sense that it has its origin not in God, the generous giver of every good gift (1:17), but in the human psyche which, as James has already said, is divided (1:8), and is lured and enticed by desire (1:14). It is ‘demonic’ because it is ‘set on fire by hell’ (3:6). James’s picture of what happens when jealousy and selfish ambition are given free reign, reminds us of Paul’s fears for the community in Corinth: ‘I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder’ (2Corinthians 12:20).

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy [NRSV ‘envy’] and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

¹⁶For where there is jealousy [NRSV ‘envy’] and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, clement [NRSV 'gentle'], willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, not divided and not hypocritical [NRSV 'without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy'].

¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

This whole letter has been about knowing the reality of something by looking at its fruits. James has just spoken of 'gentleness' as a fruit of wisdom. Here he looks at other fruits. In contrast to jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder and all the ways in which evil rears its ugly head, we have a wisdom that bears fruit in a life characterised by being 'pure' (Greek: *hagnos*). This is a word associated with the cult and refers to something that has been dedicated to the gods. In the present context it refers to the sharing in the divine communion that is the essence of the Christian experience. It includes being 'unstained by the world' (1:27). Paul expresses its essential meaning well when he says to the Corinthians that it is his aim to 'present you as a *chaste* virgin to Christ' (2Corinthians 11:2). John speaks of us being pure 'just as he is *pure*' (1John 3:3).

We can discern wisdom that is from God also by a second fruit: it is 'peaceable' (Greek: *eirēnikos*), a quality that is highlighted in verse eighteen and recalls the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God' (Matthew 5:9). It is also 'clement' (Greek: *epiekēs*). This is a quality that is characteristic of God as judge. It is especially important for people in leadership, for it involves the ability to see beyond the black and white of regulations, to take all factors into consideration, and to make decisions that are fair and compassionate. 'Avoid quarreling, be clement, and show every courtesy to everyone' (Titus 3:2).

It is 'willing to yield' (Greek: *eupieithēs*). It is the opposite to the kind of blind ambition that thinks only of what is good for the self and is closed to other points of view or to the feelings and needs of others. It is the truth which matters, whether convenient or inconvenient. It is 'full of mercy' (Greek: *eleos*). We recall James's earlier words: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress' (1:27).

The last two qualities define wisdom negatively. The first, *adiakritos*, is not referring specifically to the kind of favouritism or partiality to which James referred earlier (2:1-7). It is speaking, more generally, of having a divided psyche (see 4:8), trying to balance God and the world, trying to live a Christian life without having to discern or make choices. The second, *anupokritos*, is saying that true wisdom can't be a mask. It is a matter of the heart. Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy is pertinent (see Matthew 6:2,5,16). The fruit of a life inspired by God's gift of wisdom is 'righteousness'; that is to say, a life of communion with God (see 1:20). It is a life in which our whole being is perfected in the harmony of divine communion, that 'peace' which is the gift of 'our glorious Lord, Jesus Christ' (2:1).

There is no reason to suppose that the communities are actually engaged in the kinds of behaviour described here by James. We should not conclude that he had received information that the members of the various communities were murdering each other. Rather, he is developing the thesis announced earlier when he wrote: ‘one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it is sin that it bears, and when sin has reached full term it gives birth to death’(1:14-15).

Instead of following our own craving and engaging in conflicts with others to get what we desire, we should engage in prayer. God is the giver of any gift that is good. Our heavenly Father God knows our needs (see Matthew 6:32). If we really need something, God will see that we get it. It is important that we ask in faith, trusting in God’s wisdom and knowing that God knows what is best for us. As Jesus said: ‘Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive’(Matthew 21:22). If, on the other hand, we ask only in order to fulfil our own desires, this is an abuse of prayer.

James uses the feminine form, ‘Adulteresses’. He is speaking within the Biblical context of infidelity to God’s covenant in which God is pictured as the bridegroom and the community as the bride (see Hosea 3:1; Jeremiah 13:27). If there is one verse which sums up James’s central thesis it is verse four: ‘friendship with the world is enmity with God’. We must choose. The same point is made, in the same terms, by John: ‘Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world’(1John 2:15). We could reflect, too, on Jesus’ words at the last supper:

I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.

– John 15:15-19

¹Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴Adulteresses! [NRSV ‘Adulterers’] Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.’

It is the lowly who welcome God's gifts

⁵Do you suppose that scripture speaks in vain? Does the spirit that God has made to dwell in us crave with envy?

[NRSV 'Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?']

⁶But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'(Proverbs 3:34).

Verse five does not include a quotation from Scripture. Furthermore, the word 'envy' (Greek: $\epsilon\nu\nu\sigma\iota\alpha$) is not used in the Bible for God's jealous love. It is always a vice. Hence the retranslation offered. James has spoken of the kind of spirit that God gives us when he gives us the divine wisdom that comes from above. He has also described its fruits. Here he is making the point that envious craving is certainly not among them. As Scripture says in Proverbs 3:34 (and generally throughout Proverbs 3), God does not give his grace to the arrogant (or to those who are envious of the gifts that others have received, or who cannot control their own selfish ambition or resist their own selfish cravings). God alone is the source of all truly good gifts and it is the 'lowly person' who is open to receive, not the arrogant. As he said earlier, it is the 'lowly' whom God 'raises up' (1:9).

His conclusion! ‘Submit yourselves, therefore, to God’. Recognise your complete dependence on God, and, like a child, look to God your Father, humbly, joyfully and expectantly for what you need to live the life that is ‘in fulfilment of God’s own purposes’(1:18). As Paul expresses it: ‘Submit to God’s righteousness’ (Romans 10:3). This demands that we choose. Hence, James adds: ‘resist the devil’. Resist all that is in opposition to God.

God’s purpose is that we live in communion with God. James’s readers would know what a special privilege is theirs as God’s chosen people: ‘For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?’ (Deuteronomy 4:17). As Jews who recognise in Jesus God’s Messiah, they have learned that the divine communion which they are called to share is the communion which God has with his Son. A God of love will not force entry. If we draw near to God, we will realise how near God has drawn to us.

As Jews his readers were accustomed to the need for cleansing if they were to approach God in offering sacrifice. It is significant that James’s focus begins with the hands. This is consistent with his accent through out on the importance of what we do. Of course, if our actions are to be free of sin, they must come from a heart that God has purified (see Psalm 51:10). Again, James insists on the need for decision. We cannot live as Christians if we are ‘double-minded’(dipsukos: divided soul). James is speaking here of divided allegiance, having given in to the wiles of the tempter. He used the same expression in 1:8, where his focus was on not fully believing in God’s faithfulness to answer prayer and grant wisdom. On the need for purity of heart we recall Jesus’ words: ‘out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks’(Matthew 12:34). ‘It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come’(Mark 7:21). ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God’(Matthew 5:8).

Being a Christian puts us in conflict with ‘the world’. It means rejection and persecution. Again James echoes the words of Jesus: ‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep’(Luke 6:21,25). And ‘All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted’(Matthew 23:12). We recall James’s words earlier: ‘Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low’(1:9-10).

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

⁹Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection.

¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?

¹³Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.'

¹⁴Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

¹⁵Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.'

¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

James returns to the subject of speech, how we use it to harm each other, and how the way we speak reveals who we are. When we assume to pass judgment on others, we assume that we have the right to do so and the knowledge as well. Who do we think we are? God alone is the judge, as the law makes clear. Do we think we are above the law? Do we think we know better than God? Did not Jesus himself say: 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged' (Matthew 7:1)? Paul, too, writes: 'Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall' (Romans 14:4). The sin here is one of 'arrogance' (Greek: *alaxoneia*), condemned also by Paul who highlights the folly of the 'insolent, haughty, boastful' (Romans 1:30).

In speaking of God as 'able to save and able to destroy', James is echoing Jesus who said: 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matthew 10:28). Judgment is to be left to God.

Another way in which our words reveal our arrogance is when we think we can plan our lives without reference to God. James picks up here what he said earlier concerning the folly of the rich who forget how fragile and transient is our life (see 1:10-11). His teaching is traditional: 'Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring' (Proverbs 27:1). The only thing that matters is doing the will of God, and in all our decisions, it is this that must be our concern. We have Jesus' prayer to guide us as expressed in the 'Our Father': 'Your will be done' (Matthew 6:10), and in his agony in Gethsemane: 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done' (Matthew 26:42). Paul's teaching is the same: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God' (Romans 12:2).

We should know from the teaching of Jesus that it is wrong to speak evil against another person, to presume to judge them, and to boast as though we were running our own lives. To use our words in any of these ways betrays an arrogant heart and makes us guilty of sin. James has already warned us that unpurified desire leads to sin, and 'when sin has reached its full term, gives birth to death' (1:15).

This is the third warning that James has given to the rich (see 1:10-11; 2:5-6). The context this time is the imminent judgment of God. His words echo those of Jesus: ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume’ (Matthew 6:19). We are reminded, too, of Paul’s warning: ‘those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction’ (1 Timothy 6:9). Jesus’ parable of the rich fool is also pertinent (see Luke 12:15-21).

Their behaviour is even worse than that of the rich man who did nothing to help Lazarus who was lying in need at his gate (see Luke 16:19-31), for they have deliberately defrauded labourers of their wages (compare Amos 8:4-8). They can be sure that the Lord hears the cry of the poor (see Exodus 2:23; 3:7):

If you abuse the orphan and the widow, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry;

—Exodus 22:23

Those who oppress the poor will not avoid God’s judgment:

I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against ... those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

—Malachi 3:5

In indulging their craving for pleasure, the rich have failed to realise that they are being ‘tempted’, ‘lured and enticed’ by desire. They have ‘fattened their hearts’ the way we force feed animals. Don’t they see that we do this only in order to prepare them for slaughter? So it is for the rich. In the words of Jeremiah, they are being ‘set apart like sheep for the day of slaughter’ (Jeremiah 12:3). As James has already said: ‘judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy’ (2:13). The NRSV translators read the final remark as a description of the oppressed who are not able to offer resistance. It is perhaps better read as a rhetorical question warning them that God is not indifferent to the plight of the poor and will resist those who oppress them. As James said earlier: ‘God opposes the proud’ (4:6).

¹Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you.

²Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten.

³Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days.

⁴Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous one.

Does he [God] not oppose you? [NRSV ‘who does not resist you’].

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

In the section just completed, James filled out what he said earlier in the letter about the passing nature of wealth and the judgment which the rich would have to face (see 1:9-11). He went on to say: ‘Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him’(1:12). He enlarges on this point here as he continues to speak of the ‘coming of the Lord’, which, along with others in the first Christian generation, he expected to be ‘near’.

He urges his readers to be ‘patient’(Greek: makrothumēō). We could translate ‘Keep on loving even when it is hard’. This is listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). ‘Patience’ is more properly a translation of the Greek hupomonē, which speaks of our ability to bear up under difficulties, to ‘endure’(see 1:3,4,12). makrothumia, on the other hand, refers to our sharing in God’s magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by opposition or suffering. It is the ability to remain constant in love and in a large hearted (Greek: makro) way (see 1Thessalonians 5:14). It features as a description of the Lord in the credal statement found in Exodus 34:6 and repeated in Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Nehemiah 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2. It is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus.

The rich spend their time ‘fattening their hearts’(5:5) by indulging their self-indulgent desires (1:26). James urged his readers earlier to ‘purify’ their hearts (4:8). Here he urges them to ‘strengthen’ their hearts. Speaking of the ‘righteous’ the Psalmist says: ‘Their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord. Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid’(Psalm 112:7-8). James’s thought is similar to Paul’s: ‘may the Lord so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints’(1Thessalonians 3:13).

The 'Judge standing at the door' recalls Jesus' words: 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates' (Mark 13:28-29). The author of the Book of Revelation uses the same image: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne' (Rev. 3:20-21).

In verse eleven James returns to the subject of 'enduring' (Greek: *hupomenō*; see 1:3,4,12). His words recall those of Jesus:

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

– Matthew 5:11-12

He reminds them of Job and how, in the end, God rewarded Job's endurance. If they endure, God's purpose for them will be achieved as it was for Job. They must put their trust in God, for 'the Lord is compassionate and merciful'. For 'compassionate' James uses a word that is found nowhere else in the Greek Bible, either in the Old or New Testaments. It is better translated 'compassionate in every way' (Greek: *polusplagchnos*). For 'merciful' he uses a word, *oiktirmōn*, which, like *makrothumos* is repeated in the credal formula describing God as: 'merciful (*oiktirmōn*) and gracious, slow to anger (*makrothumos*), and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6). In the Greek Old Testament *oiktirmos* translates the Hebrew *rḥm* which includes the meaning 'womb'. God has the kinds of feelings for us and demonstrates the kind of care which a mother has for the child in her womb. Luke uses this same word when Jesus says: 'Be *merciful* just as your Father is *merciful*' (Luke 6:36).

⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!

¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

¹²Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

James continues his concentration on speech. He has already made it abundantly clear that our speech must come from the heart and be expressed in the way we act. He focuses on speech because he sees the importance of how we communicate with God and with each other. His accent on genuineness is shown here in his criticism of the practice of taking oaths. The context is perhaps best clarified with reference to the statement in the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus – a chapter that stands behind many of the reflections in this letter: ‘you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord’ (Leviticus 19:12). James is not ruling out oaths altogether. He is underlining the fact that human speech of itself should be truthful. It is easy for the taking of oaths to degenerate into using God’s name to cover statements that are less than truthful. He is echoing the words of Jesus;

I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

– Matthew 5:34-37 (see also Matthew 23:16-22)

Still on the subject of words, James highlights the importance of prayer. Whether things seem to be going badly for us or seem to be going well we should lift up our minds, our hearts and our voices to God in prayer.

When the Twelve were sent out on mission by Jesus, they ‘cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them’ (Mark 6:13). It is clear from our present passage that the ‘elders’ who were responsible for organisational leadership in the Christian Jewish synagogues (see 2:2) continued this practice, praying over the sick in Jesus’ name (see Acts 3:6).

Verse fifteen is deliberately composed to be read at two levels. ‘Save’ can include physical healing, though its primary meaning is in reference to communion with God. ‘Raise up’ can include getting up from one’s sick bed, though its primary meaning is in relation to the resurrection of Jesus and rising from the death of sin into communion with God. Jesus warns us not to make a necessary connection between sickness and sin (see John 9:1-3), yet we should not be surprised if breaking communion with God would have an effect on our physical and psychic health (see 1 Corinthians 11:29-30). James’s key focus is on the ‘church’ rallying to support the sick with ‘the prayer of faith’ (see 1:6).

The community, too, needs the healing power of God's grace. Let them come together humbly, as sinners, confessing their need for forgiveness and praying for one another. James has already made reference to the power of words, likening the tongue to the bit which controls to movements of the horse, or the tiller that controls the movements of a ship (see 3:3-5). He reminds his readers of the power of prayer: 'the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective'. Gazing, once again, into the mirror of God's inspired word (1:25), James points to the power of the prayer of Elijah (see 1Kings 17:1; 18:42; compare Luke 4:25).

James concludes his letter with an exhortation to community love. He has had a lot to say about sin and about judgment, for he is concerned that his readers realise how important their behaviour is. They must not compromise with the world, even though their stand invites persecution. Like Paul, he does not want us to misunderstand God's patience. God is patient but we must repent of sin. What we do and what we say matters. Our communion with God and our salvation depend upon it.

But the fact that we have sinned is not a matter for despair. There is forgiveness, if we repent, and we can help each other to do this. The need and importance of brothers and sisters within the community caring for one another enough to dare to correct one another is another way of underlining the truth that not every opinion is right, not every way of acting is right. The truth matters, and we must be committed to the 'word of truth'(1:18); we must not be 'false to the truth'(3:14).

Within the community it is our constant, mutual love that should characterise our lives. Such love, according to the proverb, 'covers all offences'(Proverbs 10:12). None of us is innocent. We all need forgiving. A Christian community is committed to mutual help in reminding one another of God's mercy, pointing out to one another where our behaviour needs to change, and offering one another the love and the forgiveness needed if we are to enjoy communion with God.

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,

²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.