

A commentary on the epistle of James

Introduction

Since the birth of the Protestant movement, the epistle of James has endured an unfortunate reputation among many Christians. This rough treatment can in fact be traced as far back as the second century, when the Muratorian Canon neglected to list James as an accepted canonical work of early Christian literature. Several writers in the fourth century also labelled the epistle as a 'disputed' work, which indicated that it was a matter of contention whether the letter was valuable enough to be part of the canon. Nevertheless, the most likely factor that has led to the present state of neglect is the words of Martin Luther himself. In his preface to his discussion on the books of James and Jude, Luther outlines a number of reasons why he considers the epistle of James to be at the very least inferior to every other book in the New Testament.¹ He argues that James ascribes justification to works, and on that reason alone is against the entirety of Scripture and proves that the epistle was not written by an apostle. Furthermore, Luther argues that the essence and definition of Christianity found in James is devoid of key concepts; specifically the death, resurrection, and the spirit of Christ. In other works, Luther states that the epistle had "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it", and that compared to Paul and Peter this book is "an epistle of straw".

It is highly probable that many Protestants today are unaware of how critical their branch's founder was towards this particular book of the Bible, but I believe the evolution of ideas and 'doctrinal discipline' in Protestant thought has nevertheless prevented a thoughtful study and consideration of the work. Indeed, it will be demonstrated that James has been shunted solely for coming down on the wrong side of a certain debate in the history of the Christian Church. As with the parts of the Gospels before the crucifixion, Christianity today has responded to a part of the New Testament that contradicts a specific interpretation of

¹ The preface can be found in Luther's *Works*, vol. 35, pp.395-398

Pauline theology by ignoring it (or at least interpreting it in such a contrived manner that its meaning is distorted). The most profound claim made by Luther was that the epistle of James is starkly dissimilar to ‘the nature of the Gospel.’ This claim implies that while the epistles of Paul and Peter follow a natural progression from the message of the Gospels, James stands alone in his thoughts and conceptions of Jesus and God.

In my teenage years I will confess to considering the epistle of James my favourite non-Gospel book of the New Testament. I was surprised to read the various attacks on it from a number of highly respected figures in Christian history, but upon further reflection it is entirely consistent with the way in which Christianity has often sought to pervert the original message of Jesus. It is claimed by Luther that this epistle is the most dissimilar to the message of Jesus than any other book in the New Testament, but that is not true. In fact, it is quite easy to demonstrate that this epistle shares far more similarities to the words of Jesus than either Paul or Peter. This is not to say that the letters of Paul and Peter are of little use (as Luther goes on to argue regarding James), but rather that the letter of James is such an amazing work of early Christian literature that it deserves a careful and open-minded study.

James Chapter 1

The origin of the letter of James is enough to make the study of it worthwhile. After the Gospels, the New Testament is filled with epistles that are predominantly addressed to churches that are outside Israel and mostly inhabited by Gentiles. Accordingly, when Paul discusses problems unique to the recipient church he is discussing problems associated with Gentile churches in general. As Paul established these churches and taught them about Jesus and Judaism, the theology and issues of the church are not necessarily representative of the early Christian movement as a whole. What is missing from these letters is an understanding of the many Christian communities that grew in Israel. Not only were these churches numerous, they represent branches of the early Christian movement that were often at odds with the Gentile Pauline churches (e.g. the Ebionites). A letter of James, being

a prominent Jewish Christian, gives readers today an insight into the more Jewish forms of early Christian thought. It will not be outlined here, but there is considerable evidence to suppose that James was addressing his letter to an audience that contained a majority of Jewish Christians.²

The first chapter sets the tone of the rest of the epistle, and establishes the letter as a piece of early Christian wisdom literature.³ Wisdom literature has a strong tradition in Judaism (e.g. Proverbs), and there are many Jesus scholars that argue that the majority of the content within the Synoptic Gospels can be viewed within the wisdom genre. James 1:2-8 elucidates two common themes in early Christian thought: enduring pain and being single-minded. For James, Peter, Paul, John, and Jesus himself, it was vitally important for any follower of Jesus to understand that possessing (and spouting) such subversive views in Jewish or Gentile societies will likely result in persecution. Indeed, considering the constraint placed on Christians not to arm or defend themselves from this persecution, the required level of endurance was high. One obvious example of this occurring is the persecution of Roman Christians at the hands of Nero. Disturbingly described by Tacitus, the victims of this persecution were often tortured and killed in horrible ways. So disturbing it was it led the author of the book of Revelations to call Nero the beast; or antichrist. There are a number of other historical examples that give the impression that suffering was an ever present threat to a number of early Christian communities. Accordingly, writers felt the need to encourage their brethren to endure, and promised them rewards for doing so (James 1:12, compare this with the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:22).

James 1:9-11 can be seen as a further expression of a theme that was quite important to Jesus, yet mostly absent in the letters of Paul. James extols the value of humility, and belittles the archetype 'rich man' who will fade away in time. Verse 11 demonstrates the poetic side of James, and the few verses share strong similarities with a few key sayings of

² E.g. see: Paul Achtemeir, Joel Green, and Marianne Thompson, *The New Testament: its literature and theology*, Eerdmans Publishing Company 2001

³ Bear in mind, however, that chapters were artificially imposed on manuscripts.

Jesus.⁴ This passage not only prepares the ground for a strong critique of the wealthy later in the epistle, but also emphasises the fleetingness of the earthly existence. As Jesus explained several times in the Gospels, earthly possessions are ultimately of very little significance. The imagery James utilises is reminiscent of the famous acclamation of Ecclesiastes 3:20 that *'All came from the dust, and all return to the dust.'*

Like Jesus, in 1:19-20 James discusses the importance of abandoning anger for the life of a follower of Jesus. Again like Jesus, in 1:14-15 he does the same with lust. Indeed, throughout the Epistle it is hard not to get the sense that James shares a great similarity with Jesus over personal morality. Of course this similarity is also shared with Paul and Peter, yet it does demonstrate another area that James can be viewed as a direct continuation of the message of Jesus contained within the Gospels.

The rest of the chapter builds up to a climatic conclusion. It is an extraordinary verse that is worth directly quoting:

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.
(James 1:27)

For our contemporary context, the venom in this verse is how starkly dissimilar it is to any mainstream definition of Christianity. This may have been the case in the time it was written as well, as Paul seemingly presents a version of pure and undefiled religion that emphasises different ideals. I suspect it is one of the reasons that Luther had such a lowly view of James (for the second reason see chapter 2), as he preferred the Pauline perspective. It is this verse that is at the heart of the James' conception of Christian thought: maintain personal purity and fulfil the law. As legalistic and unchristian as this proclamation sounds, do not judge too quickly. Chapter 2 of James develops James' idea of pure religion, and for anyone familiar with the sayings of Jesus it will provoke a severe sense of *deja vu*.

⁴ Two examples (there are more): Matthew 16:26 (Mark 8:36), Matthew 19:30.

James Chapter 2

Chapter 2 is by far the most oft-quoted chapter, and the most studied. It contains his words on Faith vs. Works that have forever confused and distressed Christians who view this book, along with the epistles of Paul, as inerrant. It also contains his view on Jewish law, and how fulfilling that law is an important part of following Jesus. Before all that, however, James inserts a rather amazing ethical situation in verses 1-7. It appears that in certain assemblies rich men were being given favourable treatment and places of prominence. Considering Jesus' view on status, wealth, humility, and the tone of the passage, it is clear that this phenomenon greatly disturbed James. He proceeds to outline three reasons why this practice is antithetical to the true spirit of the Christian movement, and they are all great points that bear even greater relevance in today's climate.

Firstly, 2:4 has James asking these assemblies that by doing this, *'have they not made distinctions amongst themselves, and become judges with evil motives?'* This is not a serious question, the answer is obviously yes. Significantly, both parts of this sentence are presented independently and are each sufficient to indict their behaviour. By judging the value of these two men (the rich man and the poor man) by their appearance they have done a great disservice to themselves.⁵ The 'evil motives' that James ascribes to their actions could possibly be the desire to extract money from these wealthy men. Furthermore, James considers it an offence for them to make distinctions amongst themselves. These distinctions sound remarkably close to a hierarchical structure based around respect and voluntarily forfeited autonomy. As I have argued in my article 'The Quiet Revolution', any division of people within early Christian gatherings based on class, respect, or religious authority was forbidden by Jesus and discouraged elsewhere in early Christian literature.⁶

Secondly, the Christians have chosen to judge the poor man as inferior, which is in direct contradiction to the message of Jesus. Jesus said that the poor would be the heirs of the

⁵ Matthew 7:1-6

⁶ For example, consider Matthew 23:8-12

kingdom of God, and as James mentions they are also rich in faith.⁷ Thirdly, they chose to judge the rich man as superior and worthy of respect. Considering his own comments in chapter 1, it is no surprise that this attitude frustrates James. James poses the question *‘Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?’* It is no surprise that it is primarily the wealthy that persecute the Christians directly through violence or indirectly through the judicial system. After all, the message of Jesus is radically hostile to all members of society that either possess large amounts of money or hold positions of power and authority over other people. Such a message is subversive to the status quo in both Israel and throughout the Roman Empire, and fearing these dangerous ideas will spread among the poor, the powerful seek to suppress it through persecution (as Jesus experienced on the cross).

Verses 8-13 in Chapter 2 discuss the role of the royal law in Christian life, and how mercy and love is the essence of it. As this section is discussed, it will be noted how in every instance the words of James have a complete parallel in the words of Jesus. In verse 8 James sums up the law in a way akin to how Jesus, Paul, and even the Old Testament, did so: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”⁸ James then reminds us, as Jesus did, that this proclamation implicitly excludes a number of activities like murder and adultery. In Matthew 5:17-20 Jesus outlines how interpreting the law as loving your neighbour does not allow his followers to breach a portion of the Judaic law (again, we are discussing activities such as murder and adultery). This is identical to the point made by James in 2:10-12. This section of chapter 2 is ended in 13 with a really magnificent verse that echoes Matthew 5:7: *‘For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.’* This section leads to a greater understanding of 1:27 by revealing how James views the traits of a follower of Jesus. His life, James postulates, will be marked by love and mercy, but a greater emphasis on these traits do not negate ethical directives given to the Jews concerning acts such as murder. In fact, abstaining from these acts is a natural consequence of a life filled with love. A proper understanding of concepts such as ‘the law’,

⁷ As one example, see Luke 6:20.

⁸ Matthew 22:39, quoted from Leviticus 19:18.

‘keeping the law’, and ‘transgressing the law’ is vital to interpreting passages found in the New Testament concerning the Christian requirement to uphold the law.

The second half of the second chapter (2:14-26) outlines James’ view on the faith vs. works debate. Even the shallowest reading of this passage will reveal the stark contrast between the perspective of James and that of Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9; Paul states that justification is by faith alone, and James argues that faith without works is dead. The simplest way to interpret this contrast would be to say that these two grand figures of early Christianity had opposing viewpoints on an important issue, and that each follower of Jesus must decide for himself which is true according to words of Jesus found in the Gospels. However, once you believe that the whole of the New Testament canon is divinely inspired by God and infallible truth, it becomes a significant complication. By far the most common defence mechanism utilised by today’s apologists is to simply ignore James. The Pauline perspective is the one more consistent with modern protestant doctrine, and therefore it wins the argument by default. A slightly more sophisticated version of this approach, but no less offensive, is to offer an interpretation of this passage and in the process explain any contradiction away using peculiar logic.⁹

Let’s examine more closely the argument that James is making in this passage. By writing on this issue it is clear that at the very least a small minority of Christians were claiming to have a great deal of faith, and resentment was growing when others observed that they did not possess the corresponding works.¹⁰ James is upset, and tells the audience that faith without works is dead and therefore useless for all parties. He illustrates this in 15-16 with a destitute person who lacks clothing or food. If someone were to say to him “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled”, and yet does not provide the resources required to obtain clothes and food, it is useless. This exclamation is as useless as faith without works, as it is aesthetically pleasing but of no practical benefit. Purporting to be a follower of Jesus and

⁹ See most competing commentaries on the book of James.

¹⁰ Works here will be defined as an outward expression of love that in some way benefits another person. Charity, forgiveness, generosity, non-violence, and self-sacrifice are all examples of this concept.

adopting all of the beliefs, passions, and mannerisms associated with modern Christianity is useless if the core directives of Jesus is not being expressed existentially (through your existence within the world).

James continues the chapter with a concept of justification (or salvation, if you will) that is at odds with much of the Christian literature released today. He mentions the example of Abraham (ironically called a “knight of faith” by Soren Kierkegaard in his work *Fear and Trembling*) and Rahab from the Old Testament. In both instances, they are justified by their works. However, you’ll note that James mentions that their ‘faith was working with his works’, and ‘as a result of the works, faith was perfected’. “Faith vs. Works” is a false dichotomy. It is not that one is greater than the other, or even that both are equally required. In the message of the Gospel, *The Good News*, they mean the same thing. Suppose you think that Jesus Christ had come from God, and that he revealed to you the will of God for your life. That’s great, but what does that really mean? Can such a proclamation be satiated by a sincere belief that Jesus died and rose again for your sin, and an emotional attachment to worship, prayer, and the Bible? No, it can’t, for as Jesus said many will say ‘Lord, Lord’ without actually knowing him.¹¹ Jesus came to the multitudes with a message; a clear series of ideals and commandments that he required from each of his followers. The sum of his teaching is a philosophy, and it is so radical it can’t be subscribed to without a strong reordering of behaviour, priorities, and focus in life. To say that you have faith in Jesus is to take his Good News and make it true in your life, and the only way to do that is to be ‘Doers of the Word’. Hearing and believing is not sufficient, as it is dead without the proper existential expression. Faith and Works are inseparable because they in practice mean the exact same thing, and become meaningless when artificially cut off from the other. This view is entirely consistent with a reading of the Synoptic Gospels. Ephesians 2:8-9 appears to directly contradict it, but I don’t believe Paul himself would be hostile to the notion. After all, I can’t think of another early Christian writer that more eloquently or passionately expressed how vital love is for a follower of Jesus.¹²

¹¹ Matthew 7:22

¹² 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 13:8-10, etc.

James Chapter 3

Verses 1-13 of Chapter 3 devotes itself to the topic of the tongue; more specifically the way that people communicate and use speech for good or ill. I believe there is a strong tendency for contemporary readers of the Bible (including myself) to gloss over passages such as this. Perhaps it is my penchant for controversy, but after such a climatic ending of chapter 2 a discussion of proper communication feels less important. After all, every Christian would be in agreement with the sentiment of this passage, and therefore there is not much point meditating too thoroughly on the passage. This feeling must be set aside, however, as to give it any less than careful consideration would be to ignore the significance that James has placed on the topic. According to James, it is of such fundamental importance that an unchecked tongue could defile the entire body.

He uses three metaphors to communicate the importance of speech for the follower of Jesus. The tongue is like a bit in a horse's mouth that allows a person to lead its body, a rudder on a ship that while very small directs its entire mass, and a small fire in a forest that eventually consumes the entire area in flame. Evidently James is astonished how a very small part of the body could affect every area of our lives. Furthermore, he notes that while mankind is able to tame every species of animal, he is not capable of taming the tongue that is a 'restless evil and full of deadly poison' (3:7-8). The passage gives the impression that the 'tongue' is an autonomous part of the body with an independent will that must be subjugated. Of course this is not true, but the tongue does express emotion that has long been antithetic to the virtuous life such as anger, deceit, jealousy, and judgment. The final point that James makes on this matter is that it is absurd that tongues can be used almost simultaneously for blessing God and cursing men. Preachers who first utter nice prayers and proceed to hate certain social groups especially come to mind, but it is a global phenomenon with which every individual has varying degrees of guilt. Overall, this passage can be viewed as a reiterated warning against everyday vices that are common among Christians. While there are a plethora of equivalent passages throughout the Old and New Testament, it is a message that deserves attention with each repetition.

The rest of Chapter 3 is concerned with the nature of wisdom, which is unsurprising for a piece of wisdom literature. Verse 13 again emphasises the importance that James places on actions by telling his readers to show their wisdom through their deeds. 14-18 sets up two competing forms of wisdom. The wisdom from above is markedly peaceable, gentle, and reasonable. The natural earthly wisdom is defined by jealousy and selfish ambition, and produces disorder and strife. It's interesting that James specifically mentions jealousy and selfish ambition, which may be indicative of the problems that were plaguing the addressed churches at the time of writing. Division and disorder within early Christian groups would certainly be consistent with many of Paul's epistles, which regularly warn of division and suspicious motivations in certain members. It also reinforces the theory that these early Christian communities relied on a very loose (or non-existent) hierarchy that emphasised sharing and humility. If there is a primal urge that would reveal itself in these situations it would be the ambition for honour, status, and authority. This passage could be part of the evidence in these epistles that this problem was playing out in a number of communities.

James Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of the epistle of James reads like a fiery sermon. While it does not reach the level of 'fire and brimstone', James gives a variety of warnings for a number of indiscretions. Again, it also provides insight into the details of the audience of this letter. His grievances can be generalised into three general areas: insatiable desire, pride, and certainty. From verses 1-3 it is clear that a number of conflicts and divisions were threatening to splinter certain groups of early Christians. The source of this disunity in this instance appears to be envy over money, possessions, and women. He continues on in verses 4-10 with a restatement of a common early Christian idea that it is only the humble that will be exalted by God and those who exhibit pride will be forcibly humbled. Remember that James was fortunate enough to be a literal follower of Jesus, and was responsible with taking care of a significant share of the new movement. It was a critical time for this new movement as their leader was executed. Historically it has been shown that many would-be Messiahs popped up in Israel around that time, and after the death of the leader the movement would usually wither and die. It was vital for James that the movement continued to prosper and grow, for

it carried an extremely important message. It must have been devastating for James to see a group of Christians at this time viciously argue over things as trivial as material possessions and other Christian's partners. While reading the chapter you can feel the agony of James, and it leads him to write in an unusually harsh tone.

James Chapter 5

Verses 1-6 of James chapter 5 is a remarkable example of how early Christianity was aggressively opposed to the wealthy class. This particular element of Jesus and James left the movement rapidly, perhaps due to the increasing number of wealthy people joining the movement as it became more popular. An example of this happening can be found in the same epistle James 2:1-7. James notes in that passage how members of the congregation were acting towards the new rich members of the congregation, and if that continued to be a regular occurrence in early Christian communities it is easy to imagine how the anti-wealth aspect of early Christianity disappeared over time. Nevertheless, this unequivocal message is important and even more uncomfortable to hear in today's world, where most Christians in developed countries are relatively wealthy.

1-3 of James 5 echoes Jesus in Matthew 6:19-24 with a warning about the fleeting nature of material possessions. While physical objects degrade over time and are prone to loss from human thievery or natural disasters, the spiritual side of existence has lasting ramifications and can be the only source of a meaningful existence. Interestingly while Jesus uses this language to try and convert people from their earthly predilections, the goal for James is to condemn the wealthy. The absurdity of the situation presented in James is exemplified in verse 3. The rich have stored up treasure in the form of wealth in the last days (the belief that an apocalyptic event was about to transpire was common), but the gold and silver have rusted and their flesh is about to be consumed with fire. It was so clear to James what the direct consequences will be for earthly luxury, and how God would judge those who prioritised as such.

Even more interesting is verses 4-6. In verse 4 James exclaims that the cry of the rich man's labourers has reached the ears of God. They cry because their pay has been withheld. The crucial factor when interpreting this verse is to properly determine the extent of generalisation required. It is clear from the verse that James is not discussing one particular rich capital owner. The archetypical 'rich man' is used most likely to describe the general behaviour that is representative of the wealthy in that time period (but as it turns out, not exclusively that time period). Withholding an entire pay packet is extreme, and could not be done by all the rich regularly otherwise the workers (who by and large earn close to subsistence wages) will literally starve to death. I believe that in this verse James is condemning, in general, the exploitative nature of employment by the wealthy in that context. Withholding pay, or at the very least withholding what the labourers deserve, is the specific example that James uses to demonstrate the point.

Verse 5 illuminates the way in which the lifestyle of a rich man is not only repugnant to James, but also absurd. The rich have lived their lives luxuriously and went through life in search of wanton pleasure. This is absurd because by doing this they have opened themselves up to eternal judgement, or as James remarks 'fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.' This proclamation is heavily reminiscent of Jesus in Mark 8:36 where he said 'what does it profit you if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?' Verse 6 contains a very nice surprise for anyone paying close enough attention. James says that the rich man have condemned and put to death the righteous man. Before he ends the sentence, he adds that the righteous man does not resist the rich man. The context of this passage is that for James the wealthy are generally a great source of evil, and are responsible for the suffering of the righteous man. This is consistent with a remark made by Paul in 1 Timothy 6:10, 'the love of money is the root of all evil.' In face of this evil, the righteous man is put to death or suffering, and does not resist the rich man. This is one of the only direct parallels for a significant teaching of Jesus that is found in Matthew 5:39; 'do not resist an evil person.' Resistance in this sense is referring to violent resistance, and James offers a further confirmation that non-violence was vitally important to many early Christians. After all, it is not only found in direct teaching, but the lives of the early Christians themselves. The book of the Acts and other New Testament books constantly

refer to persecuted or executed Christians that do not violently resist their captivity or torturous death.

The rest of the chapter has a number of themes. Outlined extensively is the need and benefit of prayer, whether it is for sickness or sins of a fellow Christian. Verse 12 offers another important parallel to the teaching of Jesus; this time to Matthew 5:37. James and Jesus in these passages discuss the importance of clear communication that is devoid of oaths or swearing. Jesus phrases it as ‘let your statement be yes, yes, or no, no. Anything more is of evil.’ Accordingly, Jesus considers oaths and swearing to be evil. James appears to go even further by beginning his verse with the phrase “above all.” It is extraordinary that after all of the important things contained in his letter, he reserves this statement to be the most important of all! I can imagine that the air of the marketplaces in ancient Israel were filled with advertisements of the merchant’s wares, coloured with oaths made to God, the Temple, and the Heavens about the quality and reliability of their product. Such a trivial use of sacred language obviously offended Jesus and James deeply. Not only this, honest communication of your intentions is the only way to live a life that is blameless and without deceit. Once you start to distinguish between regular statements of varying reliability, and ‘promises’ that are granted extra authenticity, then it leads to qualities and habits that are hated by Jesus and his follower James. Lastly, verse 20 outlines another virtue that will cover a multitude of sins; saving a fellow brother from the error of his way. In the very close-knit communities exhibited by the early Christians, the value of cooperation and friendly aid is undoubtable. Due to the fact that ideas can spread in these types of communities as quick as viruses (for good or ill), correction done in love is vital for the community’s health. Of course, this must be balanced with the non-judgemental nature of Christianity, exemplified in Matthew 7:1-6.

Conclusion

Hopefully this exploration of the epistle of James has illuminated how rich, diverse, and satisfying this piece of early Christian literature can be. It has gained a great deal of

notoriety for its inconvenient theology in the latter part of chapter 2, and has accordingly been ignored by many preachers and religious writers. This does Christianity a great disservice, as even a shallow reading of the Gospels will reveal that the teaching of James is entirely consistent with that of Jesus. Throughout the letter are direct parallels to sayings or commandments of Jesus, so much so it is clear that James was a faithful disciple of Jesus and wishes to continue to spread his message to a greater audience. This is a far cry from Luther's comment that there is "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." Any inconsistency with the theology of Paul should provoke questions regarding the actual teaching of Jesus himself, rather than create battlelines among Christians that result in schisms. In any event, I believe that the letter of James beautifully articulates the necessity to not merely be hearers of the Word or believers of the Word, but rather doers of the Word. It also provides a number of invaluable insights into the social implications to the teachings of Jesus, especially regarding the wealthy. It certainly does not deserve neglect, or to be considered any less than a useful supplementary reading to the Gospels for any person interested in imitating Jesus.

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