

COMMENTARY ON JAMES

The author of the letter identifies himself simply as James. Of the four New Testament James, only the son of Zebedee and the Lord's brother stand out as prominent. James the son of Zebedee, however, died a martyr's death in AD 44 (Acts 12:2) and it is unlikely that the epistle was written as early as this. We are left, therefore, with James, the Lord's brother, as the most likely author of epistle. This James became a popular and respected figure in the early church, especially among Jewish Christians. James venerated as the first 'bishop' of Jerusalem and was given the title "the righteous" or "the just" because of his faithfulness to the law and constancy in prayer. Much of our information about James comes from Hegesippus' account of James' death as recorded by Eusebius (H.E. II.23). He tells us that James was stoned by the scribes and Pharisees for refusing to renounce his commitment to Jesus. This account of James death is independently confirmed by Josephus (Ant.xx.9.1), who also enables us to date it in AD 62. ¹

Circumstances of the Letter:

It is almost certain that the readers are Jews. The letter implies that these Jewish believers were mainly poor people who were caught in a situation of considerable social tension. Oppressed and taken advantage of by wealthy landlords (5:4-6), hauled in to court by rich people (2:6) who also scorn their Christian faith (2:7). ² The content and tone of the letter strongly imply that the readers are Jewish Christians.³ The letter must be dated sometime before A.D. 62, when James was martyred.⁴

¹ Douglas J. Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, ed. Canon Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Erdman's Pub. Co., 1988), 20.

² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 30.

³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 32.

⁴ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 33.

It is a common place to claim that James has no theology. James says little about many basic Christian doctrines. James says nothing about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the theological significance of the church, the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ, the atoning death of Christ, or the resurrection. However, Moo argues that it is grossly unfair to accuse James of being untheological. We must remember that he was writing to believers who were already well acquainted with fundamental Christian teachings; and especially his readers were former parishioners, there was little reason for him to rehearse these teachings again. Their problem was a failure to put their faith into practice. Therefore, it is here, at the level of practical daily living, that James concentrates.⁵

2: 14-17: Faith, works and justification

The most famous controversial and important contribution of James to theology come in his teaching about the relationship of faith, works and justification in 2:14-26. He is resolutely opposing any form of Christianity that drifts into a sterile, action-less ‘orthodoxy.’ As important and necessary as is ‘right belief,’ it is much less than true *Christian* belief if it is not accompanied by works. That this is James’ overriding concern in this section cannot be mistaken: for he states the point three times (2:17, 20, 26). Some of his readers, apparently through a misunderstanding of Paul, were confining ‘faith’ to a verbal profession (2:19) and empty, insincere good wishes (2:15-16).⁶

It is important to recognize that this ‘faith’ of which James speaks, the faith that a person ‘claim’ to have (v. 14), does not correspond to James’ own understanding of faith. He sees faith as a firm, unwavering commitment to God and Christ that is tested and refined in trial (1:2, 4), and grasps hold of the blessings of God in prayer (1:5-8; 5:14-18). These texts demonstrate how wrong

⁵ Douglas J. Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, ed. Canon Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Erdman’s Pub. Co., 1988), 40.

⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 44.

it is to accuse James of having a ‘sub-Christian’ or sub-Pauline’ conception of faith. On this point, James and Paul are in complete agreement. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, it is ‘faith working through love’ that counts before God; so James: ‘faith without works is dead.’⁷

On another point, however, it is frequently claimed that James and Paul do represent contrasting positions. This point has to do with the place of works in justification. Paul, as is well known, strongly emphasized the complete sufficiency of faith as the basis for justification: ‘We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law’ (Rom. 3:28). James, on the other hand, claims that ‘a man is justified by works and not by faith alone’ (2:24). Furthermore each cites Abraham to illustrate his own point, Paul arguing that God’s pronouncement of Abraham’s righteousness (Gen. 15:6) came solely on the basis of faith, before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:1 – 12), and James claiming that Abraham’s justification came as result of his obedience in being willing to sacrifice Isaac and that in this act Genesis 15:6 was ‘fulfilled.’ These viewpoints are often singled out as representative of two different, even conflicting tendencies in the early church: the law-free Gentile mission (Paul) and law-affirming Jewish-Christianity (James). If this were true, we would be faced with a disturbing situation. On an issue as vital as the question ‘What must I do to be saved? The New Testament would seem to speak with two different voices. Understood in their own contexts, and with careful attention to the way each is using certain key words, it can be seen that James and Paul are making complementary, not contradictory, points.’⁸

The first point is that Paul and James are combating **opposite problems**. In Paul’s statement about justification in Galatians and Romans, he is countering a Jewish tendency to rely on obedience to the law (‘works of the law’) for

⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 45.

⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 45.

salvation. Against an over-emphasis on works, Paul highlights faith as the sole instrument of justification. James, on the other hand, is combating an *under-emphasis* on works a ‘quietistic’ attitude that turned faith into mere doctrinal orthodoxy. Against this perversion of faith, James is forced to assert the importance of works.⁹

The second point to be mentioned is the **different context** in which Paul and James are speaking of ‘works.’ When Paul claims that a person cannot be justified on the basis of works of the law, he is clearly referring to works that *precede* conversion. The works in James 2, however, are the works that stem from and are produced by faith: works that follow conversion. It is obvious that works done before a person has faith in Christ and works done as a result of faith in Christ would not have the same role in salvation.¹⁰

The third, and most important consideration: If Paul has in mind works that precede conversion and James works that follow conversion, it follows that the ‘justification’ for which these respective works are the basis must be something different in Paul than in James. Indeed, this seems to be the case. Paul uses the Greek verb *dikaioo* (justify) to describe the dynamic activity whereby the sinner is graciously given a new status. This status, this righteous standing before God, the judge of all the world, is based in the sinner’s union with Christ and is secured through faith. For Paul, in other words, *dikaioo* is a term that denotes the initial *transfer* of a person from the realm of sin and death into the realm of holiness and life. Because it is precisely the sinner, the ‘ungodly’ (Rom. 4:5), the one with no righteousness of his own to offer, who is justified, ‘works’ can have no place in effecting this transfer.¹¹

In James, however, *dikaioo* has a different meaning, a meaning that is well attested in the Old Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew and in many Jewish sources. In these sources *dikaioo* usually describes a verdict that is based on the

⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 46.

¹⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 46.

¹¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 46.

actual facts of the case; a judge declares a person ‘righteous’ because that person can be proven, in fact, to *be* ‘righteous’ or innocent. Furthermore, this verdict of justification is often associated with the last judgment. Since James is so clearly oriented to a Jewish context and shows so many parallels with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, it would be expected that he would use ‘justify’ with this meaning. Confirmation that this is so comes from the link between justification in 2:21 – 25 and salvation in 2:14, where the salvation is to be related to the verdict pronounced at the last judgment (see 2:2 – 13). What James is saying, then, is that ultimate, or ‘final justification,’ the verdict pronounced over our lives in the last day, takes into account the works that must inevitably be produced by true faith. On the fact and basis of this ultimate verdict, James and Paul are one. For Paul also reminds us that ‘*we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body*’ (2 Cor. 5:10). Where they differ is on the terminology used to describe this verdict.¹²

It is true that ‘Paul and James move in this matter in different circle of thought, and the attempt to superimpose one circle on the other in order to determine their agreement or disagreement in details in futile [useless].’ ... Paul fervently maintains that faith is the only human condition for the transfer of the sinner into the sphere of God’s grace. James says little about this initial transfer – although we should not overlook his statement that Christians have been ‘brought forth by the word of truth’ and that this process is due to the will of God (1: 18). What James is concerned about is the attempt to eliminate works from having any role in the verdict rendered over our lives. While our union with Christ by faith is the sole basis for justification in God’s sight, the works necessarily produced as a result of that union are taken into account in God’s ultimate judgment over us. In theological terminology, Paul is speaking of the

¹² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 47.

imputation of righteousness, James of the *declaration* of righteousness.¹³

The Law

Discussion about the relationship between James and Paul usually focus on the matter of justification, but another issue, the function of the law in the Christian life, presents its own problem. Cadoux maintains that James and Paul are farther apart over this question than over justification. James calls the law a “law of liberty” though Paul calls it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death and sin. The difficulty touched on by Luther is that Paul appears to absolve from any obligation to the law; they have ‘died to the law’ (Rom. 7:4), are no longer ‘under the law’ (Rom. 6:14-15), but are ‘led by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:18). James, however, implies that Christians must still be ‘doers of the law’ (4:11) and insists that ‘the whole law’ will be the standard of judgment (2:9-12). Without exploring the question as to whether Paul completely eliminate the law as an authority for Christians – and passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34, Ephesians 6:2-3, and Romans 8:7 should us pause at this point – James’ perspective deserves further attention. First, it is evident that James does not include the ceremonial commandments in his conception of the law. Never does he mention this aspect of the law, even when it would be natural for him to do so. Thus, in 2:10-11, [*For 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*] where he argues that failure to obey ‘one point’ of the law is to be guilty of all of it, he cites as examples two commandments from Decalogue, where the typical Jewish argument would have mentioned a minor ritual commandment to highlight the

¹³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 47.

need to obey even seemingly inconsequential commands.¹⁴ James is very far from a conservative Jewish attitude towards the law, for the ritual commandments were an inseparable and important part of the law in Judaism. Secondly, the way James qualifies the law in three places is significant. In 2:12 he calls the law a ‘law of liberty,’ in 1:25 the ‘perfect law, the law of liberty’ and in 2:8, citing Leviticus 19:18, the ‘royal law.’ Now the designation ‘perfect’ for the Old Testament law was customary among Jews, and descriptions of the liberating effect of law were common among both pagans and Jews. But the context in which James uses the description suggests that he intends more than this. Crucial here is the fact that ‘the perfect law .. of liberty in 1:25 seems to be equivalent to ‘the word of truth’ by which Christians are ‘born again’ (1:18), the ‘implanted word’ that brings salvation (1:21). .. We find, then, that James’ use of the word ‘law’ (*nomos*) cannot be separated from the gospel associated with Jesus.¹⁵

The Christian life:

It is in this area that James makes his most important contribution; ‘no other book of the New Testament concentrates so exclusively on ethical questions.’ James’ insistence that Christians *do*, not just listen to, the word of God, and his demand for works as integral to faith, are part and parcel of this emphasis. Obedience to the ‘law of liberty,’ the demand of God summarized by Jesus, must be heartfelt and consistent.¹⁶ And this obedience has an important *social* aspect. The command to ‘love our neighbors as ourselves’ is ‘the royal law’ (2:8). James is insistent that ‘pure and undefiled religion’ must manifest itself in concern for the underprivileged and disadvantaged (‘visiting orphans and widows in their affliction,’ 1:27) and in a meek and unselfish attitude toward others (3:3-18). Favoritism toward the rich violates this ‘royal law’ (2:1-7).¹⁷

¹⁴ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 48.

¹⁵ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 49.

¹⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 51.

¹⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 51-52.

Poverty and wealth

There is an OT-late Jewish piety-poverty tradition. It is necessary to know this tradition in order to understand James' important contribution. In the Old Testament, this tradition can be summarized in four points. First, God has a particular concern for the poor, the downtrodden, the outcasts. God is the 'Father of the fatherless and protector of the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing' (Deut. 10:18). Accordingly, secondly, God's people must manifest a similar concern for helpless people.¹⁸ The Deuteronomy passages continues, 'Love the sojourner therefore,' and one of the most frequent denunciation that the prophets brought against Israel was that they failed to care for the poor (cf. Amos 2:6 – 7). A third Old Testament tradition, particularly prominent in the Psalms, is the tendency to identify the 'poor' ('ani') with the pious, the righteous, (see especially Pss.10; 37:8-17; 72: 2,4; Is. 29:19). Here there is a mingling of social and religious concept that is the source of much confusion. Economic lack and social persecution become closely related to religious piety. In their oppression, 'the poor' put forth their oppressed condition as a basis for their plea to God for deliverance. 'As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God! (Ps. 40:17). In the situation in which these Psalms were written, it is clear that many of the righteous were also suffering oppression at the hands of the wealthy. This leads to the fourth aspect of the tradition, more prominent in late Jewish writings in the Old Testament: wealthy and powerful people tend to become identified with the wicked.¹⁹

The teaching of Jesus is strongly influenced by this background and James undoubtedly draws from that teaching as well as from the Old Testament. He reminds his readers that 'God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be

¹⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 53.

¹⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 54.

rich in faith' (2:5), where we are reminded of our Lord's beatitude, 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). In a text that closely resembles the prophets' denunciation, James' pronounces judgment on the rich (5:1-6). And like the 'poor' in the Psalms, James' readers need to look to the Lord with patience and endurance for deliverance (5:7-11). Neither James nor the prophets, however, condemn the wealthy just because they are wealthy. James, for instance, enumerates the specific sins for which 'the rich' will be judged selfish hoarding of money (5:2-3), senseless luxury (5:5), defrauding the worker (5:4) and persecuting the righteous (5:6). That James does not condemn the rich as such is probably also demonstrated from 1:10-11, where 'the rich man' is probably a Christian 'brother.'²⁰

Nevertheless it is clear that most of James' readers were poor and that many were experiencing oppression from wealthy and powerful people. In this situation, the rich biblical tradition we have described provides James with a fruitful source of imagery and content.²¹

Poverty and wealth: 1: 9-11

9 Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up,¹⁰ and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field.¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

Poverty may be the most outstanding and difficult trial facing the readers of the letter. Still others suggest that James' discussion of the 'double-minded' person leads him to speak about that area of life that is most often troublesome in creating divided loyalties in our attitude toward God: the conflict between and mammon. The description of the brother in verse 9 was lowly (tapeinos) suggests a Christian who is low down on the socio-economic scale – one who is

²⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 54.

²¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 55.

relatively poor and powerless. This sense of the word *tapeinos* is warranted both because the Old Testament frequently uses the term with this meaning (cf. Pass. 1018; 34:18; 102:17 Is. 11:4; Am. 2:7), and because *tapeinos* is here contrasted with *plousios*, 'rich' (v.10).²² If James is writing to Jewish-Christians in Palestine and Syria, many, if not most, of his readers would have been poor. We know of a famine that struck at about this time and it is probable that Christians, ostracized by much of the populace, would have suffered particularly severely (see Acts 11:28-29). In the midst of such afflictions, the Christian, whose position in worldly terms is low indeed, is *to boast in his exaltation*. *Boast* means in this context not the arrogant boasting of the self-important, but the joyous pride possessed by the person who values what God values. It is just this combination of present status and future inheritance that James singles out in a verse that is almost commentary on the meaning of *hypsos* (2:5): Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?²³

v. 10: **The rich person**, like the poor person, must look beyond his outward physical circumstances to the abiding spiritual values and circumstances of the unseen 'heavenly realm.' The antithetical contrast between 'poor' and 'rich' picks up a common biblical theme. This theme developed particularly in the later Old Testament period, when the 'poor' (Heb. 'ani') became closely identified with the humble, afflicted saints who trusted God for deliverance. Similarly, the 'rich' were often linked to godless oppressors who trusted in their wealth for deliverance. God promised to exalt the former group, but to judge the latter. The hope expressed by Mary in the Magnificat is typical of this tradition: 'he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away'

²² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 66.

²³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 67.

(Lk 1:52). [If James is the Lord's brother, then Mary is James' mother too. The language the two are using are analogous].

While some suggest that the rich person here must be unbeliever. But Moo suggests that in this case, the 'rich person' must be a believer. This alternative finds support in the syntax since 'brother' (*adelphos*), coming before 'the lowly one' (*plousios*) in verse 10 also. Isaiah 40: 6 – 8, to which James clearly alludes in verses 10b-11, makes just this point: 'all flesh' fades away, in contrast to the word of God that stands forever (see also the use of his text in I Pet. 1;23-25). Psalm 49: 16-17 contains a similar warning about wealth: '*Do not be afraid when some become rich, when the wealth of their houses increases. ¹⁷ For when they die they will carry nothing away; their wealth will not go down after them.*' James draws from this biblical tradition to remind the wealthy Christians that riches do not endure and that he must be constantly on guard against placing too much emphasis on what he cannot carry away with him into the next world. ²⁴

James, then, exhorts both the poor and rich Christians to remember that the sole basis for their confidence is their identification with Jesus Christ. The poor believer, insignificant and of no account in the eyes of the world, is to rejoice in his relationship with the Lord who has been exalted to the highest position in the universe. The rich believer, well-off and secure in his possessions, with great status in the eyes of the world is to remember that his only lasting security comes through his relationship with the 'man's sorrows' 'despised and rejected by men.' Both Christians, in other words, must look at their lives from a heavenly, not an earthy perspective. ²⁵

V. 11. This verse continues the allusion to Isaiah 40:6-7, describing in more detail he 'fading away' mentioned in verse 10. The image of the quickly fading flower would have been a familiar one for Middle Eastern readers who annually

²⁴ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 68.

²⁵ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 69.

saw the early spring flowers wither suddenly under the sun's merciless heat (East wind). This is a frequent image of judgment in Hosea 13:15: *Although he may flourish among rushes, the east wind shall come, a blast from the Lord rising from the wilderness; and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched. It shall strip his treasury of every precious thing.*²⁶

The point is explicitly summarized in verse 11: just as the flower, seemingly flourishing one day, is dead the next, so the rich person *will fade away in the midst of his pursuits*. The verb *fade away* (*maraino*) clearly denotes death here. In this context, and in the light of James 4: 13, the word probably denotes the profit-motivated business trip in the midst of which the rich Christian is suddenly 'taken away.'²⁷

1: 21-27: Be doers of the word

It would be a fatal misunderstanding to think that James is against listening to the Word. But what James strenuously oppose is any *hearing* of the word that does not lead to *doing*.²⁸ With this emphasis James aligns himself with a widespread Jewish belief of his day 'Not the expounding [of the law] is the chief thing, but the doing [of it]' said a second-century rabbi (Simeon B. Gamariel in Mishnah, Abot. 1:17). Paul reflects this Jewish emphasis when he writes: 'It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified' (**Rom. 2:13**). And James' concern is once again firmly in line with Jesus' teaching: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11: 28). Jesus' preaching is filled with the overwhelming, amazing wonder of God's sovereign grace reaching down to sinful men in the gospel. But equally prominent is Jesus' summons to radical obedience – an obedience that is the necessary human response to God's grace. Both factors, the gracious initiative of God and grateful response of man, are part and parcel of the gospel.

²⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 69.

²⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 70.

²⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 81.

The Word, through which we are born into new life (v. 18) and which become implanted in us (v. 21), is a Word that is to be put into practice.²⁹

Those who fail to do the word, who are *hearers only*, are guilty of a dangerous and potentially fatal self-delusion. If the gospel, by nature, contains both saving power and summons to obedience, those who relate to only one have not truly embraced the gospel. That is why James can say that people who only *hear* the word are *deceiving* themselves. They think that they have a relationship with God because they regularly attend church, go to Bible studies or read the Bible. But if their listening is not accompanied by obedience, their true situation before God is far different.' Obedience,' says Calvin, 'is the mother of true knowledge of God.'³⁰

1: 23-25 James elaborates on the contrast between the person who only listens to the word and the one who both hears and obeys it, by means of simile. The 'hearer only' compared to someone who considers *his natural face in a mirror*, but quickly forgets what he has seen. The doer of the word, on the other hand, looks into the *perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres*; He is a *doer that acts*. What is the point of the comparison?³¹ The 'hearer only' glances hastily and carelessly into law of liberty, while the doer considers it carefully. This would presume that the *mirror* in verse 23 is comparable to the *perfect law* of verse 25. This emphasis reappears at the end of verse 25, where the *hearer that forgets is contrasted with the doer that acts*. This stress suggests that James maybe using the look at the mirror to illustrate the superficial and temporary effect of the Word on those who hear it without doing it. The doer of the word, on the other hand 'remains,' or *perseveres (parameinas)*, which may suggest that he continues to do the Word (cf. NIV), or that he continues to contemplate

²⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 82.

³⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 82.

³¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 82.

the Word (cf. GNB). In either case, the doer of the Word is commended for demonstrating in his actions the continuing impact of the Word on his life.³²

2:13: *For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Showing mercy is just what the love command requires (v. 8) and what James' readers are failing to do when they '*dishonor the poor man.*' The relationship between mercy and concern for the poor is explicit in Zechariah 7:9-10: '*Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; ¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor ...*' If James' readers continue to discriminate, they place themselves in danger of facing a harsh judgment. The reciprocal relationship between man's mercy and God's is brought out repeatedly by Jesus, most strikingly in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35; *Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?*" ³⁴*And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt ...*; cf. also Matt. 6:14-15: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*). If failure to show mercy receives a severe penalty, the opposite is also true: *mercy triumphs over [God's] judgment (2:13b).* ³³

Our conformity to the 'royal law' is never perfect (2:10-11). But our merciful attitude and actions will count as evidence of the presence of Christ within us. ³⁴

³² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 83.

³³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 98.

³⁴ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 99.

2: 14-26: The faith that saves

2: 14 What 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 without 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 without works is barren? 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', 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.

This passage is the climax of James' plea for a 'pure religion' that vindicates itself in action. It is a text that sustains a single theological argument throughout. Clearly we have here a passage that lies at the very heart of James' concern. He is deeply troubled by an attitude towards 'faith' that sees mainly a verbal profession – such as the confession that 'God is one' (2:19). This is a faith that is 'apart from' works (2:20, 26), and James views *this* faith as 'dead' (2:17, 26, 'barren' (2:20); it does not have the power to save (2:14) or to justify (2:24). James assumes the necessity of faith. He claims to have faith (2:18). But the faith *he* has, 'real faith,' 'has works' (2:14, 17), is 'completed by' works (2:22), is 'active along with works' (2:22). It is the kind of faith exhibited both by the revered 'father' of faith, Abraham (2:21-23), and Rahab, the immoral outcasts (v. 25). It is absolutely vital to understand that the main point of this

argument, expressed three times (in, 2:17, 20, and 26), is not works must be added to faith but that genuine faith includes works. That is its very nature.³⁵

James is combatting some false teachers who were setting forth an incorrect view of faith. Almost certainly, these teachers were familiar with Paul's insistence on 'justification by faith alone.' But it is equally clear that their understanding of Paul's view is tragically flawed; the view James contests in this passage is certainly not Paul's. Properly interpreted, Paul and James are united in their understanding of faith and works and their relationship to justification. The appearance of a conflict is created because they give two key words, 'faith' and 'justify,' different meanings and because their arguments are advanced against different errors.³⁶

2:14: James' emphasis on 'showing mercy' and its consequence for the day of judgment (2:12-13) leads naturally to such questions, 'How can deeds of mercy help in the judgment?' James answers these questions by pointing to the inseparable union between faith and works. He directed to a *man* who is advocating a 'faith only' view. [James claims] faith that has no works brings no *profit*; that kind of faith cannot *save*. James is not saying that faith does not save; he is saying that the faith this person claims to have, a faith that has not works, cannot save. Therefore, while James' own view of faith does not differ from that found in Paul and the rest of the New Testament (cf. 1:6; 2:1, 5; 5:5), in 2:14-26 'faith' often refers to 'bogus' faith that neither Paul *nor* James would regard as genuine Christian faith. This bogus faith, James says, does not have *works*. On the one hand, James uses works in a positive sense, to refer to deeds of love and mercy that Christians do to fulfil the law of love (cf. 2:8-13). Paul, on the other

³⁵ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 99.

³⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 100.

hand, polemicize against ‘works of the law,’ a phrase that is said to connote the legalistic observance of especially the ritual aspects of the Mosaic law. ³⁷

In general, Paul and James mean the same thing by ‘works:’ actions done in obedience to God. The difference between them is the context in which these works are done. Paul denies that works can have any value in bringing us into relationship with God; James is insisting that, once that relationship is established, works are essential. ³⁸

A faith that lacks these actions cannot save. While *save (sozo)* sometimes describes the initial entrance of a person into God’s kingdom (‘conversion’), it often denotes the final deliverance from sin, death and judgment in the last day. This is the meaning word seems to have in James (cf. 1:21; 4:12; 5:20), and it makes good sense here, since verse 2:13 has spoken of the final judgment. When James says, then, that the faith some people claim to have cannot save, he probably means that it will be of no profit at that time of God’s righteous judgment. ³⁹

2:14: Additional Note: ‘Works’ in Paul and James

It would seem that both Paul and James are operating with an understanding of ‘work’ that is basically similar: anything done that is in obedience to God and in the service of God. The difference between Paul and James consists in the sequence of works and conversion: Paul denies any efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works. James uses 2:15 – 16 to illustrate: He pictures one who has at least an external relationship to the church, since it is his *brother or sister* who is in need. The need is for basic, life-sustaining provisions: adequate clothing and daily food. How does this believer respond? He dismisses the person in need

³⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 100.

³⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 101.

³⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 101.

with pious words: *Go in peace, be warmed and filled. Go in peace is a familiar Jewish form of dismissal.*⁴⁰ If the believer would be encouraging his needy fellow Christians to provide for themselves, 'to make their own way'; 'keep yourselves warm, and have plenty to eat.' If the verbs are passive, the dismissal would take the form of prayer: 'May you be warmed and well fed.' In either case, the point is the same: confronted with a need among his brothers and sisters, this 'believer' does nothing, but express his good wishes. *What does it profit? Providing for the poor is one of those deeds of mercy that will 'triumph over' the judgment of God* (v. 13). In this, James sands in a long and well-represented biblical tradition. Isaiah called the people of his day to put real meaning into their religious rituals by 'sharing bread with the hungry,' 'bringing homeless into their houses' and 'covering the naked' –*then* God will answer when they call (Is. 58:7-9). Jesus promised the kingdom to those who feed and clothe 'the least of these my brethren' (Mt. 25:31-46). And John denies that anyone who fails to provide for a brother in need can have real love; love is found not 'in word or speech but in deed and in truth' (I John 3:17-18). The warning is one that the church needs constant to hear. Too often we have been content to offer mere words, when God may have been calling us to action. Words – sermon, prayers, confession of faith, wise advice, encouragement – are indispensable to true Christianity. But they are shown to have real meaning, James reminds us, when people can see actions that correspond to those words.

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2: 17. James draws the conclusion from the illustration: *faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.* The phrase *by itself* (*kath'heauten*) suggests, as Mayor says, that the faith is '... not merely outwardly inoperative but inwardly dead.' This kind of faith is 'in and of itself' useless, inactive, inert (the meaning of *nekros* in a context like this; cf. Rom. 7:8; Heb. 6:1; 9:14). The contrast is not, then,

⁴⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 102.

⁴¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 103.

between faith and works, but between a faith that ‘has works’ and a faith that does *not* have works. The latter is, like a body without a spirit (cf. 2:26), lifeless, and profit one nothing on the day of judgment.⁴² [because judgment is done on the basis of works].

I find myself concurring with James while I was serving the homeless. After preaching love or justice, I had to put that into action immediately. Right after the service that included songs, prayers and sermon that comforted the suffering homeless people lined up to see me with all sorts of different needs. It was an occasion that I need to act what I just preached. If my words (sermon) didn’t match with my action – solving their problem and meeting their needs – I would become hypocrite. And how much I appreciated the supporters and volunteers who confessed and professed their faith in Christ came and helped us with their money, talent and time. And how deeply disappointed and frustrated to many Christians who confessed the same faith but never come to help us by putting their confession – faith – in action. Therefore, I agree with James wholeheartedly that faith that doesn’t act is useless or death faith. Perhaps as I have, James too might have seen so many Christians who didn’t care about the poor in his days but they always confessed and professed their faith. Many in his days and in our days who work with the poor and eye-witness to their dire situation on daily basis and experience frustration about the lack of help from church community would share the same notion of “faith with no work is dead faith.”

2: 21. Faith without works does not ‘justify.’

It is possible that James adduces Abraham as an example because his opponents have already used Genesis 15:6 as a proof text for the importance of faith. Abraham, one of the most revered figures in Israel’s history, was referred to frequently by Jews in support of all sorts of views. Abraham’s amazing

⁴² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 104.

obedience to the Lord's 'hard' command to sacrifice his son Isaac was a particularly popular source of theological and devotional comment. Philo calls this 'offering of Isaac' the greatest of Abraham's 'works' (On Abraham, 167); and 1 Maccabees 2:52 links Abraham's faithfulness 'in the test' to the pronouncement of Genesis 15:6 'and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.' James argues that Abraham's willingness to kill his son in obedience to the Lord's command is evidence of 'the works' on the basis of which Abraham was 'justified.'⁴³ [Even if he had all the faith in the world, if he didn't put his faith in action of offering his son could he be justified? His faith that put God's command in action is important point. Both argument seems to be valid. It is true that Abraham had faith. It is also true that he put his faith in action.]

Moo claims that it is at this point that James' argument becomes problematic. For in claiming that Abraham was *justified by works* he appears to be in contradiction with Paul, who claims equally clearly that Abraham was justified by faith and *not* by works (Romans 4:1-3). While many scholars claim that the contradiction cannot be resolved, a careful examination of the ways in which the crucial term *dikaioo* (*justify*) is being used will show that Paul and James are not in conflict. This term is associated above all with Paul, who makes 'justification by faith' the centerpiece of his argument in Galatians and Romans. But what is important to recognize is that Paul gives to the term justification a very distinct meaning, one that is closely related to his whole theological perspective. He designates with this language the initial transfer of a person from the realm of sin and death to the realm of holiness and life. This transfer takes place by virtue of the sinner's identification, by faith, with Jesus Christ, 'the righteous one.' For Paul, then, justification is sovereign, judicial act in which God, apart from any human 'work,' declares the sinner to be innocent before him (Rom. 4:5).⁴⁴

⁴³ Moo, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 108.

⁴⁴ Moo, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 108.

There is some difference of opinion over the precise meaning James gives to *dikaioo*. A significant number of scholars think that James is using the word in a demonstrative sense that they demonstrated their righteous status by performing good works. Any conflict with Paul would then be removed, because, while he [Paul] stresses that faith is the only condition for the declaration of righteousness, James would be arguing that works are the only way in which the righteous status can be demonstrated.⁴⁵ Therefore James is probably using *dikaioo* in a declarative sense, but he differs from Paul in applying the word to God's ultimate declaration of a person's righteousness rather than to the initial securing of that righteousness by faith. In other words, James uses 'justify' where Paul speaks of judgment. It is this distinction, between what Wesley called 'initial justification' and 'final justification,' that explains the apparent discrepancy between Paul and James.⁴⁶

The use of *dikaioo* in this sense has ample precedent in the Old Testament, Judaism, and the teaching of Jesus. In the Old Testament, *dikaioo* (Heb. *Sadag*) generally denotes a verdict of innocence which rendered on the basis of demonstrated 'righteousness,' or 'covenant loyalty.' This verdict is naturally associated with the last judgment. In the teaching of Jesus, this meaning of *dikaioo* is also clearly found. He warned his listeners on one occasion: 'by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (Matt.12:37). James' frequent dependence on Jesus' teaching, particularly as found in Matthew, makes this reference all the more important. One important objection to this interpretation of James 2 is that, according to the RSV, Abraham was justified *when* he offered Isaac.⁴⁷

James asserts that Abraham did works and that these works were used as criteria in God's ultimate judgment over Abraham's life. He assumes that

⁴⁵ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 109.

⁴⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 109.

⁴⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 109.

Abraham had faith and that this faith was basic to Abraham's acceptance of God (vv. 22-23). But he stresses that the life of the one who has been so accepted by God must show the fruit of that relationship in good works. It was what precedes and enables these works that Paul concentrates on. Paul wants to make clear that one 'gets into' God's kingdom only by faith; James insists that God requires works from those who are 'in.'

[This could be the exactly how our volunteers and contributors feel. They have faith and they are in the kingdom. They want to show some fruits of their faith by doing (works) volunteer work or giving generous contribution for the cause of poverty and homelessness].

2:21: Additional Note: 'Justification' in the Old Testament and Judaism

The verb *dikaioo* occurs forty-four times in LXX. Of the twenty eight times there is a Hebrew original, twenty-two involves a form the verb *sadag*. The word is associated above all with the 'law court,' and describes the verdict of innocence rendered by the judge. *Sadag* is often without direct reference to a legal setting, but the forensic [legal, criminal] connotations are maintained (Gen. 38:26; 44:16; Jer. 3:11; Ezek. 16:51-52). Very often God is pictured as the judge before whom one pleads one's case (I Sam. 12:7; Is. 43:26; Mi. 7:9) and who passess judgment on the lives of men and women. What is particularly important is that this divine verdict is usually rendered with respect to actual conduct. For example, in Micah 6:11, the Lord warns that he will not acquit (*dikaioo*) the man 'with wicked scales.'⁴⁸

God declares innocent those who conform to the standards expressed in the covenant. With this comes also the recognition that, in himself, man can never merit God's acquittal: 'Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee (Ps. 143: 2). Here there is clear precedent for

⁴⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 110-

Paul's emphasis on the entirely gracious nature of justification (Rom. 3:20 and Gal. 2:16). Nevertheless the general thrust of the Old Testament is that men are declared to be in the right *on the facts*, i.e. because in general or in a specific matter they *are* upright, and innocent.' This declaration is naturally closely related to the final judgment (Is. 43:9; 45:25; 50:8; 53:11).⁴⁹

Judaism maintained the same basic viewpoint: 'righteousness' related to correct conduct, as defined by God's law, and the verdict of justification was pronounced over those who faithfully observed the covenant stipulations. Matthew's Gospel reflects this Jewish usage. While entrance into the kingdom is dependent on commitment to Jesus ('following Jesus'), 'righteousness' is mainly, if not exclusively, the conduct expected of the disciple (Matt. 5:20) and *dikaioo* is used of the last judgment, at which time 'works,' i.e. things we say and do, are taken into account (Matt. 12: 37).⁵⁰

2:22:²² You see that faith was active along with his [Abraham] works, and *faith* was brought to completion by the works.

James stresses the intimate relationship between Abraham's faith and his works: faith 'worked with' (*synergei*) his works (*ergois*). Abraham's faith was 'working' faith. The constant co-operation of faith and works is highlighted. Abraham's faith was not only did something to, or with, his works; his works also did something to his faith; they completed it. The verb used here, *teleioo*, means 'to perfect' or 'bring to maturity.' 'Perfect' faith is produced through successive acts of obedience. Abraham's faith was strengthened, matured and deepened by the successive 'trials' through which he was called to go. By this James does not mean that faith cannot exist without works (for a dying person may truly believe without ever performing a 'work'), nor that faith is simply show to be 'perfect' through works, but that works are necessary, inevitable

⁴⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 111.

⁵⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 111.

product of true saving faith, and hence bring faith itself to ‘maturity.’ Faith must not be confused with works, but neither can faith be separated from works.⁵¹

2:23: As result of active co-operation of faith and works in Abraham’s live, manifested in his obedience to God when asked to sacrifice his son, he received God’s approval: received *righteousness* and was called God’s friend.

Righteousness means that God considered him as ‘being right’ before him, and this is probably the meaning of the original.⁵²

When Abraham put faith in the Lord, God gave him, then and there, the status of a right relationship with him: before he had done works, before he was circumcised. The faith of Abraham and God’s verdict of acquittal were ‘filled up,’ given their ultimate significance, when Abraham ‘perfected’ his faith with works and angel of the Lord reasserted God’s verdict: ‘now I know that you fear God’ (Gen. 22:12). James does not deny that Abraham was given righteous standing with God on the basis of his faith, long before he offered Isaac in obedience to God. But he wants to emphasize that Abraham’s faith was vital, active faith and that God’s verdict was reconfirmed on the basis of that activity.

⁵³

Abraham was called the friend of God. James cites it as an indication of the privileged status Abraham was given on account of his deep faith and practical obedience.⁵⁴

2:24: *A man is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

⁵¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 112.

⁵² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 113.

⁵³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 113.

⁵⁴ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 114.

We must recognize that Paul's 'faith' and James' 'faith alone' are entirely different concepts. **Paul** has a strongly dynamic concept of faith, by which the believer is intimately united with Christ, his Lord, and which includes a commitment of obedience to the Lord. Thus Paul can speak of 'the obedience of faith' (Rom. 1:5) and say that it is 'faith working through love' that avails in Christ (Gal. 5:6). In other words, faith for Paul includes the commitment to obedience; it is confessing that Jesus is Lord that is the true content of faith and that brings salvation and justification (Rom. 10:9-10).⁵⁵

While James' own concept of faith may not be entirely different from this, he has spoken throughout the verses 2:14-26 of a 'faith' that certain people claim to have (2:14). This 'faith' is a matter of speech without action (2:15-16); verbal profession without trust and commitment (2:18-19). It is this dead, barren faith that James designates by 'faith along' in verse 2:24. Paul himself would have been second to none in condemning anyone who thought this faith could justify.⁵⁶

As Romans 4:2-8 (and cf. Rom. 9: 10-12) shows, Paul excluded 'works' as a basis for justification. But what is important here is to remember that Paul is thinking of justification as the initial granting to the believer of a righteous status. James, as we have argued, operates with a different meaning of *dikaioo*, using it to refer to the ultimate verdict of God over our lives. If a man's initial relationship to God can be established only on the basis of faith (Paul), the ultimate [final] recognition of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce (James). As Calvin puts it: '.... As Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned to be righteous.' That little word 'only' (alone) that James adds to 'faith' makes all the difference: it shows that James has no intention of excluding faith from the process of justification.

⁵⁵ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 114.

⁵⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 115.

He was deeply disturbed, however, by a faith that had no consequence [fruit] for life – what we may call ‘cheap faith.’ Faced with this tendency, James had to place stress on the active nature of faith and to assert that actions did matter in the long run. Paul was faced with a very different problem. His Jewish and Judaizing opponents considered works done in obedience to God as a sufficient basis to maintain their place in God’s covenant. [And also for those Gentiles who could not keep up with Jew’s demand of the works of the law]. Against them [and also for Gentiles] Paul asserted that the covenant on which they relied was, in effect, broken [and that Gentiles didn’t have to follow the demand to keep the law] and that faith in Christ was the only way that could now be made right with God.⁵⁷

결론 Whenever people rely on their religious activities for salvation, Paul’s powerful plea for a radical commitment of the whole person to Christ must be vigorously proclaimed. But when ‘faith’ has been turned into nothing more than a verbal commitment to certain doctrines, James’ understanding of faith as an active, vigorous obedience must be forcefully reasserted.⁵⁸

2:25: *Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?*

James adds one final illustration. With little base for her belief, Rahab had become convinced that ‘the Lord your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath’ (James 2:11). And on the basis of this, ‘faith’ she *received the messengers and sent them out another way* [and saved their life.] James’ point here is the same as he has made in the similarly worded verses 2:21: God’s final judgment takes into consideration the actual righteousness that a person exhibits through works. The participles *received* (*hypodexamene*) and sent out (*ekbalousa*) are aorists, specifying the *works* which were the basis for

⁵⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 115.

⁵⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 116.

God's ultimate verdict. Abraham and Rahab are both mentioned because they were both considered to be proselytes (converts) who acted on the basis their faith in the 'one God.' Abraham, the widely heralded hero and 'father' of Israel, is juxtaposed [contrasted] with the pagan woman of loose reputation [harlot]. But both the patriarch and the prostitute are declared righteous on the basis of works that is issued from their faith.⁵⁹

2: 26: *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.*

James concludes the passage by restating its central theme: *faith apart from works is dead*. Just as the body without its invigorating spirit, or 'breath' of life (Gen. 2:7), is nothing more than a corpse, so faith without the works that give it vitality is dead. James is concerned not that works be 'added' to faith, but that one possess the right kind of faith, 'faith that works.' Without that kind of faith Christianity becomes a barren orthodoxy and loses any right to be called faith. Somehow ironically, no-one has captured the basic message of James 2:14-26 more forcefully than Luther:

O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

5: 1-6: Misuse of wealth

It is clear both from the many biblical and extra-biblical traditions concerning unrighteous wealth that James utilizes. The rich people pictured are clearly wealthy landowners, a class accused of economic exploitation and

⁵⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 117.

oppression from early times. In James' surroundings, we may think particularly of Palestinian Jewish landlords, who owned large estates and were often concerned only about how much profit could be gained from their lands. James proceeds to announce the condemnation of these rich landholders (v. 1) and justifies their condemnation on the ground of their selfish hoarding of wealth (vv. 2-3), their defrauding of their workers (v. 4), their self-indulgent lifestyle (v. 5) and their oppression of 'the righteous' (v. 6).⁶⁰

Why James preach this message of denunciation of non-Christians in a letter addressed to the church? Calvin appropriately isolates two main purpose: James '... Has a regard to the faithful, that they, hearing of the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their fortune, and also that knowing God would be the avenger of the wrongs they suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them.'⁶¹

5:1: James speaks in tones of the Old Testament prophets. Weep (klaio) and howl (*oloyzo*, an onomatopoeic word, sounding like what it describes) are frequently used by the prophets to describe the reaction of the wicked when the day of the Lord comes (cf., e.g., Is. 13:6; 15:3; Am. 8:3). In fact, *oloyzo* is found only in the prophets in the Old Testament and always in the context of judgment. This background makes clear that *the miseries are coming upon* the rich refer not to earthly, temporal suffering, but to the condemnation and punishment that God will mete out to them on the day of judgment.⁶²

James' denunciation of the rich picks up and develops a pervasive biblical theme. God's concern for the poor is reflected in many of the Mosaic Law giving direction for life in the covenant. In Israel's later history, these laws were ignored and the poor were often oppressed and taken advantage of by wealthy, powerful Israelites. Hence, 'the rich' occasionally becomes a synonym for 'the

⁶⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 159.

⁶¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 159.

⁶² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 159.

unrighteous' in Wisdom traditions (cf. Pr. 10: 15-16; 14:20), and many of the prophets were especially outspoken in their condemnation of rich oppressors (cf. Amos). This theme was very prominent in intertestamental Jewish literature (cf. especially 1 Enoch 94-105) and found a secure place within the New Testament. Jesus, especially in Luke's Gospel, has much to say about the dangers of wealth. In a saying particularly close to James, teaching, he pronounced a woe upon the rich and warned their 'consolation' in this world would be replaced by 'mourning' and 'weeping' in the next (Luke 6:24-5). Revelation 18:10-24 is a lengthy 'woe' directed to the 'merchants of the earth' who 'weep and mourn' over the devastation of 'the great city,' Babylon. Although some traditions appear to condemn the rich merely because they are rich, in the New Testament, at least, condemnation of wealthy people are almost always attributed to a misuse of wealth. Certainly James' enumeration of the sins of the rich people that he condemns shows that this is the case here. It is particularly obvious that James does not intend to pronounce judgment on all rich people if, James 1:10 implies the presence of rich Christians among James' readers. The designation *you rich* in verse 1, therefore, essentially means, as so often in Scripture, the unrighteous rich. 'The rich' and 'the unrighteous' are so easily associated; Scripture warns that wealth can be a particularly strong obstacle to Christian discipleship. Jesus warns 'it will be had for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 19:23).⁶³

5: 2-3. The first indictment of the rich has to do with worthlessness of the worldly goods that they have so carefully assimilated.⁶⁴ The riches provide no spiritual benefit in the present nor do they give grounds for hope at the judgment. Not only will wealth bring no long-lasting benefit – it's 'decay' – moth-eaten garments, rusted gold and silver – will testify against the rich at the judgment and bring a guilty verdict upon them: eating the flesh like fire is an

⁶³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 160.

⁶⁴ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 160.

image of God's judgment. The reason for this judgment may simply be because the rich have concentrated on the accumulation of earthly treasure to the exclusion of heavenly treasure, thereby plainly indicating where their 'heart' is (cf. Matt. 6:19-21). On the other hand, the hoarding of wealth by the rich in condemned because it was put to no use in aiding the poor: ⁶⁵ 'Help a poor man for the commandment's sake, and because of his need do not send him away empty. Lose your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend, and do not let it rust under a stone and be lost. Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold' (Ecclus. 29:9-11). The same sentiment is found in the Lucan version of Jesus' words about treasure: 'Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys' (Luke 12:33). The hoarding of wealth is wrong not just because it demonstrates utterly false priorities; it is doubly sinful because it also deprives others of their very life. This is another instance in which failing to do good is sin (4:17): 'God has not appointed gold for rust, nor garments for moths; but, on the contrary, he has designed them as aids and helps to human life' (Calvin). ⁶⁶

James summarizes the first indictment of the rich at the end of verse 3: *You have laid up treasure for the last days. Ethesaurisate* ('layup treasure') may have as its object 'fire' or a word to be supplied, such as 'wrath' (cf. Rom. 2:5), but a more striking image is yielded if, as in Luke 12:21, the verb is taken absolutely : 'laying up treasure,' the hoarding of material things in itself is what James condemns. ⁶⁷

What James is saying, then, is that those who are avidly accumulating wealth in his day are particularly sinful, because they utterly disregard the demands made upon people by the display of Gods' grace in Christ, and

⁶⁵ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 161.

⁶⁶ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 162.

⁶⁷ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 162,

especially foolish, because they ignore the many signs of the rapidly approaching judgment. Like the rich fool, they failed to reckon with sudden judgment (Luke 12: 15-21).⁶⁸

5: 4. James' second charge is that the rich have defrauded their workers of their pay. First-century Palestine, before AD 70, witnessed an increasing concentration of land in the hands of a small group of very wealthy landowners. As a result, the smallholdings [farm/plot] of many farmers were assimilated into these large estates, and these farmers were forced to earn their living by hiring themselves out to their rich landlords. Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16) is cast against this familiar rural background, and it is significant that the workers expect their pay at the end of the day. This was commanded in the law: 'You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the Lord, and it be sin in you' (Deut. 24:14-15). Such warnings are found elsewhere, for instance in Leviticus 19:13 (another possible instance of James' use of this chapter), and in Malachi 3:5 where, significantly, oppression of 'the hireling in his wages' is associated with oppression of 'the widow and the orphan' (cf. James 1:27).⁶⁹

.....
Deut. 24:14-15: *You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns.¹⁵You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.*

⁶⁸ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 163.

⁶⁹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 163.

Leviticus 19:13: *You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.*

Malachi 3:5: *Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien...*

.....
Prompt payment would have been very important for the laborer, who often got by at a barely subsistence level and who needed a steady income to provide ‘daily bread’ for himself and his family. In a society where credit was not readily available, the failure to pay workers promptly could jeopardize life itself. James is convinced, however, that the rich will not get away with their sin.

Because the accusation of withholding wages is a traditional description of the depravity of the rich, it has been suggested that James is not intending to describe conditions that actually existed in his day. But while it may be that the tradition has influenced James in singling out this particular sin, it is certain that the rich whom James chastise were actually guilty of this sin also.⁷⁰

5: 5. The pursuit of a luxurious lifestyle that is selfish and unconcerned about other’s needs is the third accusation brought against the rich. This implies an uncaring self-indulgence. The verb *spatalao* which James uses here is found elsewhere in Scripture only in I Tim. 5:6 and in Ezekiel 16:49 where the people of Sodom are condemned for their ‘prosperous ease’ and for not aiding ‘the poor and needy.’

I Tim. 5:6: *but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*

Ezekiel 16:49: *This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.*

⁷⁰ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 164.

The force of other verb James uses, *tryphao* can be appreciated in light of 2. **Peter 2:13**, which uses the cognate noun *typhe* to denote the daytime ‘reveling’ [party] in which depraved [corrupt] false teachers delight. [*suffering the penalty for doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you*].

Contrast between the pleasures the rich have enjoyed in this world and the torment that awaits them in eternity. An illuminating parallel is found in Abraham’s words to the rich man ‘who feasted sumptuously every day’: ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish’ (Luke 16:25). It is in the light of this ‘reversal of fortunes’ scheme that we are to understand the last clause of verse 5: *You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter.* Some commentators take *day of slaughter* as a reference to any time when the poor suffer horribly while the rich are indulging themselves: ‘You can live riotously while it goes badly for the pious.’ But the popularity of the tradition that contrasts earthly luxury with future judgment, along with the parallel between ‘you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter’ and ‘you have laid up treasure in the last days’ (v.3), suggests rather that *the day of slaughter* is a vivid description of the day of judgment. The phrase has an equivalent in the Hebrew text of Isaiah 30:25, where the day of the Lord is pictured. James’ point is that the rich are selfishly and ignorantly going about accumulating wealth for themselves and wastefully spending it on their own pleasure in the very day when God’s judgment is imminently threatened.⁷¹

5: 6. The final accusation against the rich is that they have *condemned* and *killed the righteous man* – the kind of man the rich persecute. The ‘righteous man’ is one who is ‘poor and needy’ and who trusts in God for his deliverance. He is

⁷¹ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 165.

often pictured as being persecuted by the wicked rich. In Wisdom 2:6-20, for instance, the desire of the wicked who live luxuriously in this life, with no thought for tomorrow, is to 'oppress the righteous poor man' (v. 10) and to 'condemn him to a shameful death' (v. 20). It is this widespread Jewish tradition (cf. also Pss. 10:8-9; 37:32) that James utilizes here to describe the excess of the rich (cf. also James 2:5-7). What does James mean when he says that the rich have killed the righteous man? This may refer to the practical outcome of the failure of the rich to share their possessions and to pay the wages of their workers: 'to take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood' (Ecclus. 34:22). However, condemn (*katadikazo*) is a judicial term, and suggests rather that the rich are using, perhaps perverting, the legal processes available to them to accumulate property and to gain wealth. Such activities had long been practiced in Israel, and were roundly condemned by the prophets (cf. Amos 2:6; 5:12; Mi. 2:2, 6-9, 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:9-16).⁷²

He does not resist you. This would be understood as a reference to the non-resistance of the poor, afflicted righteous (cf. Mt. 5:39; Rom. 12:14): the opposition of the rich is all the more heinous in that their victims refuse, or are unable, to retaliate. However, it is possible to translate, 'does he not resist you?' 'Will not God stand against you?'⁷³

⁷² Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 166.

⁷³ Moo. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries on James*, 167.