



A Mirror of Identity: Implanted Word and Pure Religion in James 1:17–27

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The author of James imagines and hopes for a life of joy lived in the context of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That joy is addressed almost immediately, hidden in the literal meaning of the Greek customary greeting that begins the letter (*chairein*, “rejoice”; 1:1). It is reiterated through the literary device of anaphora in the opening verse of the body of the treatise—“count it nothing but joy” (1:2).¹

But what happens when joy comes face to face with “trials of every kind,” as it literally does in the conclusion of verse two? What happens when the fire goes out or joy seems to be ripped from this life? What resources can we draw upon when

¹Perhaps a better translation would be “regard everything in life as joy.” Contrary to what might be indicated by the NRSV translation, which places “joy” at the end of verse two, in the original Greek, the word “rejoice” or “joy” as verb and noun actually occur linked as the last word of verse one and the first word of verse two. For a fuller discussion of this literary feature, occurring especially in the opening verses, as well as for discussion of background, key theological themes, and the overall message of James, see my article “James” in “Enter the Bible” (<http://www.enterthebible.org/newtestament.aspx?rid=59>, accessed April 15, 2015).

James continues to speak to any community among whom there is the risk of forgetting our image revealed in the mirror of our identity in Christ, where there is risk of faith becoming mere performance and losing its dynamic power. In the face of such a risk, James’s intensely personal and practical address encourages a lifestyle that remembers our identity in Christ.

the “mountain-top” spiritual experience of worship and community of a Sunday worship suddenly on Monday morning come up against life on main street—where sometimes those details and decisions that we have to deal with in the “real” parts of our lives seem downright nasty or depressing?

To such questions, James, perhaps as much as any portion of the New Testament, has a considered response that is at once practical and theological. Throughout its rather brief address, peppered with imperatival practical common-sense instructions about the living of life, it offers a no-nonsense powerful encouragement for responsible Christian action in the midst of the complex realities of life. Its address is intensely personal as it offers a vision of a lifestyle and an ethic of faithfulness that promises to get us through the sometimes complex and painful realities of life. As such its collective impression has something of the character of “reality therapy.”

The foundation for this vision is established in a confident trust in the power of prayer and in the mutual support of a faithful community. In fact, the power of prayer provides a frame that begins and ends the letter. In the opening section of James, hearers who sense they lack the power necessary to live a full life are advised that their first recourse is to turn to prayer—prayer that holds an unwavering trust that God will answer (1:5–8). Again, at the letter’s conclusion the author reasserts this confidence in prayer exercised within a community of mutual concern as one of the key marks of a community that capitalizes on the gifts of God for wholeness of life.

Within this overall frame of confidence in the power of prayer for a life of joy in the face of the many tests of life, the last portion of the opening chapter of the letter (1:17–27) offers a point of view and theological foundation that, as a kind of keynote, both introduces and grounds the themes that will be addressed literally or by allusion in the remainder of the letter. A closer look at this portion of the letter provides insight into the confidence and hope that is the basis for the joy that belongs to the Christian community living in the early days of the Christian church.

Aspects of this overall theological perspective can offer a similar basis for confidence to our present-day communities, who often see themselves struggling against insurmountable odds in a diverse and changing world. In the discussion that follows, in a sequence that follows roughly the flow of the text, this theological perspective is outlined under the key headings: God’s gift of wisdom, the implanted Word of incarnation, the mirror of identity, the wholeness of hearing and doing, and the practice of pure religion. Together these interrelated aspects of a Christian life lived within the context of trust in the power of prayer and in God’s willing and purposive engagement in human life in this world offer a powerful resource for confident living within community and within the changing circumstances of our world.

GOD'S GIFT OF WISDOM

The overall perspective of James is eminently “theological.” It has to do with a view of God and about God’s activity in creation and thus, inferentially, in human affairs as well. God is interested in what goes on in this world. The course and quality of our lives matter to God. As already noted, James begins with the assumption that if one is lacking in anything that has to do with achieving a life of joy in the midst of life’s complexities, the first recourse is to prayer. Prayer is confident both in its asking and in its expectation that God will hear and answer.

God wants creation to thrive. In order for that to happen we are invited to picture God as one who is engaged in a relational way with creation.

The most succinct and focused expression of this confidence comes in the familiar lines of the opening verse of our section: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). These words rest on the rich scriptural tradition of wisdom focused in the person of Solomon and his prayer for wisdom. It succinctly summarizes that tradition as it focuses in the gift of God’s continuing work of creation and in its regard for wisdom as the supreme mark of God’s providence in the care for and sustenance of the created order. As noted in the Genesis account of creation, endowed with the gift of intellect and mind, human beings are supplied with reason to use their resources in the task of caring for this world, to fulfill those responsibilities that belong to the living of life with the kind of joy that God intends. God wants creation to thrive. In order for that to happen we are invited to picture God as one who is engaged in a relational way with creation. Wisdom is a dynamic gift in which both the giver (*dosis*, “the act of giving”) and the gift (*dōrema*, “the gift itself”) are held together. The double description of both as “good” (*agathos*; NRSV “generous”) and “perfect” (*teleios*) recalls God’s benediction upon the creation of Gen 1. James thus anticipates and confirms the popular contemporary call and response: “God is Good—All the Time.” In the gifts of God, supreme among which is the gift of wisdom, we have all we need for living a full life.

Though God’s gifts are “from above,” they are not from a God who remains aloof from us or the creation. God’s gifts are not a one-time deal, but are acknowledged as continually “come down” from the creator. The present tense of the verb “come down” underscores this continuing act of creation occasioned in God’s active giving and in the gifts that are their benefit. In a final important move, the hearer is encouraged to recognize that such creative gifting by this generous giver is not an aberration; it is part of the essential nature of this God whom we worship. In God’s continual gifting activity there is no “straying from the course” and there is

no masking or hiding of God's true character and purpose (the phrase that the NRSV translates as "shadow due to change" might better be translated as "hiddenness of character" [*tropos*]).

That God's purposes are transparent in God's gifts is now asserted more directly. Verse 18 begins with the strong word of assurance that God is involved and intentional in the life of this world. God acts only after taking careful counsel (*boulētheis*) and then his decision takes shape in the power of his "truthful word" of creation. Of this creation, God desires that those who have now been reborn in Christ should be the first fruits (1:18). The reference to being given birth and to first fruits certainly is only a thinly veiled allusion to the experience and power of the gift of baptism, which now becomes tied to the themes of wisdom and creation.

THE IMPLANTED WORD

Reference to God's truthful word draws attention to the issue of other words, our words, and above all the Word of incarnation. Our words are particular and practical. They have to do with the exercise of the tongue and the risk of its issue in actions that can promote anger and wickedness if not slowed by the wisdom of humility and restraint.²

*James speaks of that Word as an "implanted word" that
lives in us and has the power to shape a new and whole life*

In contrast, readers are called upon to receive an alternative "implanted word" that holds the power for wholeness of life (NRSV "power to save your souls"). The phrase is unique to James; this is the only place in Scripture where these two words are used together. The image is immediately earthy and this-worldly, but also fresh, imaginative, and suggestive (1:21). I take it here to be an important allusion to that other important sense of word for Christians, the Word that is Jesus Christ in the incarnation. As such it links wisdom and the gifts of God to that supreme gift which the believer knows through being joined to the life of Christ through that new creation that belongs to baptism.

In a number of places the Old Testament speaks of God's gift of a new heart that has the power to create in us new life. The psalmist prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10); Jeremiah promises a new law written on the hearts of God's covenant people (Jer 31:33); and Ezekiel preaches God's promise of a new heart of flesh that will be the occasion of salvation and wholeness for God's people (Ezek 36:26–29). The Gospel of John begins with the note that the Word was present at creation and that this Word became flesh and dwelled among us (John 1:1, 14). Now James speaks of that Word

²Typically, themes that are here introduced in miniature appear in a more expanded form later in James. For the humility of wisdom, see 3:13–18, and for the power of the tongue for good or ill, see 3:5–12.

as an “implanted word” that lives in us and has the power to shape a new and whole life.

A MIRROR OF IDENTITY

The image of the incarnation as an “implanted word” that lives in us is typical of the letter of James, which often presents in unique or imaginative ways theological insights or themes more familiar to us in other language. To imagine Christ as an implanted Word living in us with the power of salvation certainly reminds one of Paul’s imagery of Christians as the body of Christ, as in Eucharist in which we speak of Christ living in and through us in community and in the world.

Of course such power is not always easy to trust or imagine. We are a forgetful people. Of this the author of James and his world of imagination is painfully aware. As faithful as the gifts of God are, as much as we can count on God’s promise of this implanted word to empower us as the first fruits of creation, we often forget what this power means in our lives.

When we forget, we need to be reminded who we are, who we have been made by the gifts of God that are continually being poured out among us. To make the point, James now resorts to another unique but powerful image, the image of the mirror. Forgetfulness of God’s children is like the forgetfulness of ones who look at themselves in a mirror but then, upon turning away, forget who they are and what they look like (1:23–24).

Here the author has reversed Paul’s image in the only other instance in the Bible where the word and image of the mirror occurs (*esoptron*; 1 Cor 13:12). Paul uses the image of the mirror as a symbol of obfuscation or hiddenness. To look into a mirror is to see only a dim reflection of reality, the truth of which is only to be revealed when we come face to face with the creator.³ In a move that is from a certain point of view much more in tune with common sense, James sees the mirror as a useful tool with the capacity like a photograph to remind us of true reality, when we are tempted to forget while at a distance or when confused by a host of other images.

Hence, we are here invited to return to that mirror of identity, to that image which has the power to call us back to that identity which has been given to us in that implanted Word of Christ that lives in us and continually creates us into those first fruits that are the result of God’s gracious purpose. Again, we might be reminded of Paul’s other language in another context. In what is surely a reminiscence of baptism, Paul speaks of himself as having been crucified and raised with Christ, so that the life he is now living is to be seen as in reality the life of Christ living and at work in him (Gal 2:19–20).

³Paul’s usage, of course, reflects a certain Platonic view of reality, in which earthly matters are only a dim or shadowy reflection of a true reality that is obscured from earthly existence, a view illustrated, for example, in Plato’s famous “Allegory of the Cave.” Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave,” *The Republic* VII.

A WHOLENESS OF HEARING AND DOING

The alternative to such awareness of our identity as mirrored in the implanted Word of Christ is to conduct our lives as if constantly by deceit—to be not doers of the word but only hearers who deceive themselves (Jas 1:22). Here James once again draws on the multiple senses of “word”—as particular human words, as the word of wisdom, and as incarnate Word. To live in a way that fails to honor or denies the wholeness of hearing and doing that belongs to God’s gifts is literally to live contrary to that word of wisdom and the implanted Word of the incarnation. Of this, the text literally reminds the reader by contrasting those who are “doers of the word” (*poiētai logou*) with those who, in their truncated hearing, are ones who cause themselves to live contrary to the word (*paralogizomai*; NRSV “deceive themselves”).

Of course, the vision of a wholeness in which hearing and doing are brought together is a reminder and link with the Word in a different way, since it clearly recalls a theme recognized in the teaching of Jesus. At the conclusion of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his hearers to be not only hearers but doers (Matt 7:24–27). Such a call for a wholeness of will and life that brings hearing and doing together is also part of the imaginative commonsense view of the wisdom that is the gift of God from creation. It is the lack of such wholeness that invites the psalmist, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel to long for a new heart (will) that will put life back together again. It is part of the gift of the implanted Word that lives in us through the death and resurrection of Christ. It invites early Christians to speak of the resurrection as the “eighth day of creation” in which God restores the creation to its original intent.

Paul is convinced that it is this gift which, in imitation of the life and example of Christ living in us, has the power to put our lives back together again in the exercise of mutual love and caring community. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks of this kind of wholeness of mind and will that is both modeled and empowered by the example of Christ, who “emptied himself...even to the point of death” (Phil 2:1–11). He then goes on to urge his hearers to “work out their own wholeness” (*sōtēria*, NRSV “salvation”), because “God is the one who continues to work in them to will and to act in accordance with his purposes” (Phil 2:12–13). For Paul, and also here in a different way for James, salvation is clearly seen as a kind of wholeness in which, by the implanted Word of Christ, God’s gift of wisdom enables a community of believers to exercise love and compassion for their neighbor and the world in such a way that hearing and doing, willing and action come together.⁴ To become such a hearer and doer is to be marked with the blessing of God; James here uses the same word and imagines the same blessing with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5 (*makarios*).

⁴For a fuller discussion of this theme of the wholeness of willing and doing in Christ, see my article “The Poetry of the Spirit: Willing and Doing in Galatians 5 and 6,” *Word & World* 20/3 (2000) 290–298.

PURE RELIGION

Now we get to the practical and this-worldly point of it all. God's purpose in such a blessing is not for our own personal hoarding or self-aggrandizement. It is dynamic in its new definition of and power for the exercise of what is understood as the true worship of the faith community. The linking of God's gift of wisdom in the implanted Word of the incarnation has implications for the conduct of life within the complex situations of this world (Jas 1:26–27).

When verse 27 concludes with a picture of such worship as “guarding oneself from the world so as to remain unstained” (my translation) it would be a mistake to assume that suddenly the author is advising a kind of Christianity that maintains its purity through avoidance or disengagement with the nitty-gritty affairs of the world.

The author's argument is quite to the contrary. In fact, the believer who imagines thus is described as one who has a heart that lives by deception and whose exercise of religion and worship is empty. Rather and directly to the point is the conviction that the implanted Word of incarnation—the mirror of identity that resides in the gifts of God—has the power and effect of compelling the believer back into the world with a restored vision of identity.

awareness of the world around us constantly reminds us that it is the orphan and the widow among us who constitute the group of those who are most regularly in need of care and assistance, of those about whom we need constantly to be reminded

Such an identity founded and defined by the incarnation has practical implications for Christian involvement in the world. Pure and undefiled religion is not to be characterized by detachment and nonengagement but by the “care for orphans and widows in their distress” (1:27). The reference to orphans and widows here is surely both symbolic and particular. James here is not calling on us to limit or draw borders of exclusion in our service. His words surely intend to suggest all those that by their need invite our concern and care. Even if not immediately clear, this is certainly underscored by the verbal suggestion of the word translated as “care for” in the NRSV. The word (*episkeptomai*) literally means to “look upon,” and it is regularly used in the Bible of God's “visitation” of God's people in grace and mercy.⁵

In another way the reference is instructive and particular as a sign of common sense and wisdom. Not much has changed in our world since the time of James. Awareness of the world around us constantly reminds us that it is the orphan and the widow among us who constitute the group of those who are most regularly in

⁵Cf. Luke 1:68, 78.

need of care and assistance, of those about whom we need constantly to be reminded. It is the truth of the incarnation of our Lord, that implanted Word living in us, that continues to lead us into the kind of wholeness of willing and doing that sees the true end of God's gifts among us as the care of the orphan and the widow, those who are in most need among us.

The early church understood this important implication of the truth of the incarnation of Christ. It fought hard against those who, especially around the turn of the end of the first century, were part of a large segment of early Christianity who argued against the reality of the incarnation, who fostered the view that Christ did not really come among us in the flesh. "Docetists" they were called because they argued that Jesus did not really come in the flesh, but he only "seemed" to be a human (from the Greek *dokeō*, "to seem to be"). Against such notions, early Christians reasserted strongly the real birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary, and that Jesus was really executed under Pontius Pilate. As the Apostle John says, the Word became flesh and dwelled among us (John 1:14).

They did so not simply because of empty theological argumentation, but because they realized that there were direct implications for the conduct of our willing and doing in the world, direct implications for a "religion" that takes shape in the care for the widows and orphans in our midst. That for James is the true end, the pure exercise of religion.

We know something of this concern and of its implications from the writings of the church father Ignatius of Antioch (martyred ca. 117 C.E.). In one of his letters as bishop he writes to the church at Smyrna:

Now note well those who hold heretical opinions about the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us; note how contrary they are to the mind of God. *They have no concern for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty.* They abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father by his goodness raised up.⁶

Ignatius saw the direct correlation between the confession that Jesus came in the flesh and the concern of his early Christian community for the poor among them. In the same way, the writer of James implies that the gifts of God that impart wisdom to the Christian community are evident and exercised in a community that has been reminded of its identity in the implanted Word of Christ among them, and then is empowered for love and service in the world.⁷ This certainly is to be reminded and confident of a wholeness that is the salvation of which early

⁶Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 6.2; in J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 2nd ed., ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 189 (emphasis mine).

⁷Though the precise dating of James is disputed, this linking of incarnation with care for those in need as an argument against those who would deny the incarnation would seem to me to locate James both in time and context to a situation similar to that of Ignatius around the beginning of the second century C.E.

Christians were convinced and to which they were called as the exercise of pure religion.

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James continues to speak to any community among whom there is the risk of forgetting our image revealed in the mirror of our identity in Christ, where there is risk of faith becoming mere performance and losing its dynamic power.⁸ In the face of such a risk, James's intensely personal and practical address encourages a lifestyle that remembers our identity in Christ. Faith and the church need to constantly grow and change in the midst of the changing circumstances of our world. Even if we cannot change the world, James is confident that we can change ourselves. This confidence rests not in a power that resides in us; it belongs rather to the good gifts of wisdom given to the people of God. By the gift of God we can constantly return to that identity that is constituted in the implanted Word of Christ that lives within us, and by Christ's example we can remain humble and faithful as we walk according to that law of liberty that frees us to care for our neighbor and our world. ⊕

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⁸James will exercise a considerable portion of his brief epistle dealing with this issue in the familiar discussion of faith and works (2:14–26).