



# The Letter of James: Faith Leads to Action (The Indicative Leads to the Imperative)

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Martin Dibelius's 1921 commentary on the Letter of James held sway over scholarship on the letter for well over half a century.<sup>1</sup> Dibelius viewed James as a "book of popular slogans"<sup>2</sup> that he designated as *paraenesis*. "By paraenesis we mean a text which strings together admonitions of general ethical content."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, no unifying theme was seen to hold the letter together. Instead, according to Dibelius, the letter consisted of a number of individual passages simply strung together by means of catchwords.<sup>4</sup> Scholars tended to embrace this approach almost uncritically.

At the same time, scholars tended to downplay or question the significance of the faith content of this letter. For example, Sophie Laws argued that "it is similarly generally accepted that the epistle of James, while containing a proportionately

<sup>1</sup>Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, ed. Helmut Koester; trans. M. A. Williams (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). This is a translation of H. Greeven's 11th rev. ed. (1964).

<sup>2</sup>Dibelius, *James*, xii.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

*The Letter of James is a powerful voice challenging the reader to realize that together we are called as a community to respond in the manner of Jesus to the needs of our world. The letter is a welcome antidote to the tendencies today both within our world and within Christianity that seek at times to reduce the Christian faith to a purely individualistic and private religion.*

greater amount of ethical material than any other document in the New Testament, is doctrinally the most attenuated: the faith would seem to have insufficient context to characterize the ethics.”<sup>5</sup>

In more recent decades, this approach has been seriously challenged. Many scholars have attempted to identify various themes that tend to give the writing a unity. The theme of wholeness or perfection is one such theme that a number of scholars have found, as John H. Elliott has noted.<sup>6</sup>

It is my contention in this paper that James does indeed have a clear and unambiguous understanding of the significance of faith as the all-embracing context in which to understand his ethical teaching. An appreciation of the faith content of the Letter of James provides the key to unlock its ethical teaching and to understand its vision within the framework of other early Christian traditions such as those of Matthew and Paul.

#### FAITH (THE INDICATIVE)

##### *God*

An examination of the vocabulary of the Letter of James is rewarding, revealing exactly the opposite of what scholars in the previous century had contended. James is indeed concerned with faith. In fact, the noun “faith” (πίστις) occurs some sixteen times in this short letter,<sup>7</sup> while the verb “to believe” (πιστεύω) occurs three times.<sup>8</sup> James’s exhortations all stem from the context of a theological rather than christological understanding. Further, from the perspective of vocabulary, the name “Jesus” is used only twice (1:1 and 2:1). In contrast, the name “God” (θεός) appears sixteen times, the name “Father” (πατήρ) three times, and “Lord” (κύριος) occurs eight times. God is also referred to as “lawgiver and judge” (4:12).

An examination of the faith content of the letter reveals that James is in line with his Israelite heritage. His faith is unequivocally monotheistic: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (2:19). James has in mind here the basic Israelite confession of faith, the *Shema Israel*, where the people of Israel profess undivided worship of the one God, “Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone...” (Deut 6:4). Total adherence to God is reiterated later when James excludes any form of divided loyalty: “Friendship with the world is enmity with God. Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (Jas 4:4).

<sup>5</sup>Sophie Laws, “The Doctrinal Basis for Ethics of James,” in *Studia Evangelica*, vol. 7, Papers Presented to the Fifth International Congress on Biblical Studies Held at Oxford, 1973, ed. Elizabeth Livingston (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982) 299–305.

<sup>6</sup>John H. Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective: Holiness-Wholeness and Patterns of Replication,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 23 (May 1993) 71–81. My own treatment of the importance of the concept of perfection in James was undertaken independently of Elliott’s article; see Patrick J. Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>James 1:3; 6; 2:1, 5, 14 (twice), 17, 18 (three times), 20, 22 (twice), 24, 26; 5:15.

<sup>8</sup>James 2:19 (twice) and 2:23.

James makes a remarkable confession about God's goodness: "No one, when tempted, should say: 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one" (Jas 1:13). This is a unique statement in the Bible: evil and sin are realities within our world that are totally opposed to God. Without doubt this is a statement that we as Christians need to take seriously. Sometimes people tend to think God is behind temptations and tend to blame God when bad things happen. Nothing could be further from the truth. Frank Stagg expresses this caution very well: "Against this false theology he [James] sets forth a strong theodicy, negatively denying that God is behind temptation and sin and positively tracing all good to God."<sup>9</sup>

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In accordance with the Israelite understanding of God, the Letter of James views God as transcendent and the source of every good gift bestowed on those who call on him (Jas 3:17). For James, the greatest gift that God communicates is the gift of wisdom: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you" (1:5). The Letter of James, like the book of Proverbs, stands in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, where God alone is truly wise. One must receive wisdom as a gift from God, its true source. In the biblical sense, wisdom embraces the ability to make right judgments and decisions—in fact wisdom is a practical gift of insight, knowing how to act justly and rightly in any given situation. The figure of King Solomon in the Old Testament is the type of the truly wise person. Think of King Solomon's prayer at his inauguration. He prayed exclusively for the gift of wisdom: "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people: able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people" (1 Kings 3:9). Because of his desire to rule wisely, God honors this request: "I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you" (1 Kings 3:12). This gift of wisdom, for which James encourages his readers to pray, is for the insight to carry out the admonitions laid out in in this letter. According to James, the gift of wisdom inspires the following virtues in the life of the believer: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (3:17).

James's concept of God conveys so clearly that the believer is promised every perfect gift. Whatever one lacks, one is to seek it from God. Without doubt, James's faith witnesses a dependency upon God, the source of every good gift and the guide who supports those who trust in God.

<sup>9</sup>Frank Stagg, "Exegetical Themes in James 1 and 2," *Review and Expositor* 4/66 (1969) 395–396.

*“The Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1): Identity of the Community*

In addition to the letter’s understanding of God, another aspect of fundamental importance for appreciating its ethical admonitions is the identity of the community to whom the letter is addressed. The examination of the theological understanding of God as illustrated above clearly reveals a community that is heir to the traditions of Israel.

The writer, James, identifies his readers, the community that receives this letter, as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). I have discussed the significance of this term elsewhere and have argued that it must be read within the context of the hopes of the Israelite people held over the centuries in the re-establishment of God’s twelve-tribe kingdom.<sup>10</sup> This hope emerged when the people of Israel experienced the devastation of their nation, first by the Assyrians in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C., and then by the Babylonians one hundred fifty years later in 587 B.C. with the annihilation of Southern Kingdom. The hope grew that God would one day reconstitute his twelve-tribe kingdom.<sup>11</sup> The foundation for this hope was based upon God’s covenant made with Abraham when God promised that Abraham’s descendants would inherit the land God had given him and his descendants: “On that day God made a covenant with Abram saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land...’” (Gen 15:18). This hope was renewed at the time of King David when God promised through the prophet Nathan, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16). This hope continued on through the prophets, especially during the time of their exile as the prophet Ezekiel witnesses: “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all... Then they shall be my people, and I will be their GOD” (Ezek 37:21–23).

The Gospel of Matthew and its traditions connect this same hope in the restoration of this twelve-tribe kingdom to the ministry and the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus deliberately called twelve disciples as part of an inner circle that he intimately instructed in the significance of his teaching: “To you it has been given to know the secrets (or mysteries) of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matt 13:11). In a very real way, like an acted-out parable, these twelve disciples portray the inauguration of the new twelve-tribe kingdom. When Jesus sends them out, he instructs them deliberately: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of

<sup>10</sup>For a more detailed examination of the meaning of the reference “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” and its implications, see Patrick J. Hartin, “‘Who is Wise and Understanding among You?’ (James 3:13): An Analysis of Wisdom, Eschatology and Apocalypticism in the Epistle of James,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 35 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) 483–503; Hartin, *Spirituality of Perfection*, 70–71; and Hartin, *James* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003) 53.

<sup>11</sup>Matt A. Jackson-McCabe, “A Letter to the Twelve Tribes in the Diaspora: Wisdom and ‘Apocalyptic’ Eschatology in the Letter of James,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 35 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) 504–517.

Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matt 10:5–7). In a similar vein, when Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, his initial rejection of her is based on the fact that “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). Jesus shows here that he understood his mission as beginning with gathering together the lost sheep, the scattered twelve-tribe kingdom. Jesus’ mission, and in like manner the mission he entrusted to his disciples, embraced the same vision of reconstituting the twelve-tribe kingdom.

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These traditions run throughout the Old Testament and are carried on into the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>12</sup> This provides the context for the Letter of James as well as the identity of those to whom this letter is addressed. By beginning in this way, James shows he and his readers are heirs to these hopes in the restoration of the twelve-tribe kingdom that has come about through the ministry and teaching of Jesus.

James goes further to stress that the reconstitution of this twelve-tribe kingdom has come about as an act of rebirth: “In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (1:18).

Seen in this context, the perfect gift to which James makes reference in 1:18 is the gift of rebirth (“he brought us forth, he gave us birth,” ἀπεκύησεν ἡμᾶς) as the reconstituted people of God, the twelve-tribe kingdom. We are the beginning. As such God has perfected us, enabling us to become God’s people and to ensure that we remain in this relationship with God.<sup>13</sup>

God, through his creative activity, has given us, as followers of Christ, rebirth to enter into this twelve-tribe kingdom. We did not earn it. We have not inherited it from our parents through natural birth. God alone has given us this inheritance through the rebirth of his grace. Without doubt this is, as James calls it, “the perfect gift from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (1:17).

*“The Faith of Our Glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1)*

The NRSV translates Jas 2:1 in this way: “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The Greek behind the phrase “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” is difficult to translate because it

<sup>12</sup>I have argued consistently that the Letter of James is aware of and uses the sayings traditions of Jesus that also made their way into the Gospel of Matthew (see, for example, Patrick J. Hartin, “James and the ‘Q’ Sayings of Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1991]; reprinted London: Bloomsbury Academic Collections, 2015).

<sup>13</sup>Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 72.

consists of a string of genitives: “ἔχετε τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης” (literally, “you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glory”).

The key to its translation lies in understanding the meaning of this genitival phrase as a *subjective genitive*.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the faith that is referred to is *the faith of Jesus Christ* in his Father rather than *our faith in Jesus Christ*. This gives the following translation: “My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you adhere to the faithfulness of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ’s faithfulness in carrying out his Father’s will culminates in the Father raising him from death. While the Letter of James contains no explicit reference to Jesus’ resurrection, the use of the word “glory” (δόξα) certainly contains an implicit reference to his resurrection as, in the New Testament, the word “glory” is a customary way of referring to Jesus’ resurrection.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, when James refers to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, he has in mind specifically the life and teaching of Jesus’ ministry that ultimately culminated in his resurrection.

A difference in the usage of this phrase in comparison to the Pauline expression “faith in Jesus Christ” is worth noting. This expression has been generally viewed as an *objective genitive* where the faith of the believer is placed in the person of Jesus Christ, namely “our faith in Jesus Christ.” However, more recently, some scholars have argued, convincingly to my mind, that the Pauline usage is also that of a *subjective genitive*, “the faith of Jesus Christ.”<sup>16</sup> Interpreted in this sense, the emphasis lies on the faithfulness of Jesus to his Father’s will that resulted in his sacrifice on the cross. There still remains a significant difference between James’s understanding of the phrase “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” in comparison to that of Paul. While Paul focuses on the fidelity of Jesus to his Father’s will that culminates in his sacrificial death on the cross, James stresses the faithfulness of Jesus’ life, his commitment to the poor and marginalized within society.

The approaches of Paul and James are not to be judged as opposing views.<sup>17</sup> Rather, they are to be taken as complementary to each other. It is a matter of both...and, not either...or. They each offer complementary aspects to Jesus’ obedience and faithfulness to the Father. For Paul the emphasis lies on Jesus’ salvific death; for James the emphasis is on the ethical direction of Jesus’ life and ministry. Both provide the believer with insight into and direction for their way of life. James’s approach offers a foundation and a challenge for believers to be aware of the needs of the world in which they live and to respond to them as Jesus did. As Wall says:

The profoundly ethical matter of Jesus’ faithfulness helps to form an ethical Christianity that is not only made more aware of social injustice but compels a rejection of it as a requirement of eschatological religion.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup>For a more complete explanation of the grammar of this verse as a subjective genitive, see Hartin, *James*, 117.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Luke 24:26; John 17:5; Phil 2:11; 3:21; 1 Pet 1:11.

<sup>16</sup>Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Chico: Scholars, 1983) especially 170–174.

<sup>17</sup>See Hartin, “Excursus 7: Faith and Works in James and Paul,” in *James*, 163–172.

<sup>18</sup>Robert W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) 110.

## ACTION (IMPERATIVE)

### *Imitation of God*

The most significant statement James makes about human beings is that they are made in “the likeness of God.” The implication is that being created in God’s likeness we have to act in the manner in which God acts. We have to imitate God in our actions. The Letter of James contains a number of insights that should guide the action of every believer. God is described as “compassionate and merciful” (5:11), qualities of God that are foundational to the whole of the Old Testament: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps 103:8; see also Ps 111:4 and Exod 34:6). The qualities of mercy, compassion, and steadfast love should now permeate the actions of every person created in the image and likeness of God.

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In giving a definition of religion in 1:27, the Letter of James also calls on the individual as well as the community to imitate the actions of God: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” For James, believers and the community are called to imitate God’s actions through their care for the needs of orphans and widows. Attention is specifically addressed to this group (orphans and widows) because they are among the most neglected and marginalized members of society. In the biblical tradition, God is the defender of those who are the most vulnerable in society, specifically identified by these categories of “orphans and widows.” For example, “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (Ps 68:5). “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry” (Exod 22:22–23).

Once again, the actions of believers imitate God’s actions and they are an illustration of how their faith leads to action: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledges. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this” (Deut 24:17–18). Israel’s faith and traditions taught them that, when they were strangers and sojourners, God was their champion and cared for them. So, they, as well as the hearers of the Letter of James, are to imitate God’s care and concern in a similar manner by caring for the least members of their society.

### *Faith Leads to Action (James 2:14–26)*

While the emphasis in the Letter of James lies clearly on the imitation of God,

James also presents the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for imitation. As indicated above, James stresses that Jesus' faithfulness to the Father's will is illustrated throughout his life. James reveals this thought very well in 2:14–26. Here he gives direct attention to the point he has been making throughout his letter, namely, that faith needs to express itself in action. In fact this passage (2:14–26) continues his call to emulate the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to his Father expressed in the opening verse of 2:1. In 2:1–13 James had argued that faith needs to express itself in actions that embrace all people equally without discriminating against any one. Now, James stresses, by means of an imaginary dialogue between himself and an opponent, that faith to be alive must express itself in works of love. James captures here what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21). For James, neither a person's profession of faith nor a person's ritualistic action is sufficient. James reflects here the unambiguous teaching of the prophets:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the LORD;  
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats...  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow. (Isa 1:11, 16–17)

Faith needs to be expressed in outreach and care for others, especially the powerless. In the passage above, the prophet Isaiah specifically refers to the care of the orphan and the widow, the same two categories of people that James refers to in his definition of religion in 1:27. Without doubt, James demonstrates that he lies within this tradition stemming from the prophets. He is also within the same tradition that Matthew's Gospel reflects in the parable of the judgment of the nations (Matt 25:31–46) in which those admitted to the kingdom of heaven have shown a social concern for others: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40).

The central point James makes in this passage is clear: faith is alive when in action. *Faith* needs to express itself in *ethics*. In other words, the *indicative* ("What I believe") demonstrates itself through the *imperative* ("Show what you believe.") In fact, for James there is only one kind of faith and that is a faith alive in action.

From the above examination, it is clear that James is in no way challenging



Paul's understanding of faith. Throughout his letter James demonstrates his concern for a faith that must be alive. Paul's focus was specifically on a salvific faith: for Paul, works of the law do not lead to faith and justification. These are pure gifts of the grace of God. James, on the other hand, is concerned with a believer who is already in a justifying relationship with God. James draws attention to the necessity for such a person to express their faith in actions of love. Augustine saw the relationship between the teaching of Paul and that of James in a similar way. He did not see them in opposition, but as expressing different concerns:

Therefore the opinions of the two apostles Paul and James, are not opposed to each other when the one says that man is justified by faith without works, and the other says that faith without works is useless: because the former (Paul) speaks about works that precede faith, while the latter (James) speaks about those that follow faith; as even Paul shows in many places.<sup>19</sup>

### *A Challenge for Today*

This message of James on the relationship between faith and action is invaluable for Christianity today. Every ethical admonition in the Letter of James is a call to emulate the actions of God's compassion and mercy (5:11) as well as that compassion and mercy illustrated through the faithfulness of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (2:1). Concern for the marginalized within the society (1:27); concern for the poor (5:1–6); the avoidance of discrimination (2:1–13); avoiding speaking ill of others (4:11); concern for the sick (5:13–16); bringing back a brother who has strayed (5:19–20)—all these are concrete admonitions that James addresses to his readers in their interaction with one another.

Our Western world places great importance upon the individual, very often in isolation from the community. James's letter is a wonderful reminder that challenges us to realize that God calls us into relationship with himself not just as an individual but also as a member of a community. Authentic Christian life and existence demand that Christian believers activate their faith together with other Christian believers as those reborn into the community of the "twelve-tribes in the Dispersion." The Letter of James is a powerful voice challenging the reader to realize that together we are called as a community to respond in the manner of Jesus to the needs of our world. The letter is a welcome antidote to the tendencies today both within our world and within Christianity that seek at times to reduce the Christian faith to a purely individualistic and private religion. ⊕

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<sup>19</sup>St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII Liber Unus* 76 (*Patrologia Latina*, edited by J. P. Migne 50:89); my translation.