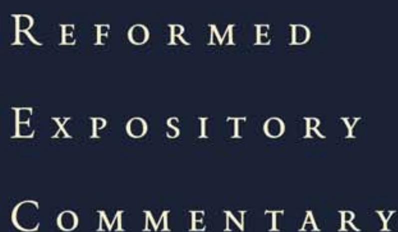
James



Reformed Expository Commentary

Daniel M. Doriani

James

Reformed Expository Commentary

A Series

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James

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In memory of my father,

Max Doriani

1914–2006

Contents

Series Introduction ix
Preface xiii

1. Introduction to James (1:1) 3
2. The Trials of Life (1:2–12) 14
3. Blessed Endurance (1:12–18) 30
4. Hearing to Obey (1:19–25) 43
5. The Tests of True Religion (1:26–2:7) 56
6. All or Nothing (2:8–13) 68
7. Faith That Works (2:14–19) 79
8. Justified by a Faith That Works (2:20–26) 89
9. Who Can Tame the Tongue? (3:1–12) 104
10. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13–18) 116
11. The Gospel according to James (4:1–6) 128
12. Grace for the Humble (4:5–10) 141
13. Pride and Humility (4:11–17) 153
14. Woe to the Rich (5:1–6) 163
15. Patient Endurance (5:7–11) 174
16. Note on James 5:12 185
17. The Quest for Healing (5:13–20) 189

Index of Scripture 205
Index of Subjects and Names 213

Series Introduction

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commen-

taries are unashamedly *doctrinal.* We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are

devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

Preface

This book is the product of a long and sweet twofold relationship with James. In my seventeen years as a professor, I taught through James one time for college students and thirteen times for seminarians. From the first, I admired the literary simplicity and theological depth in James. From the first, I also saw the practical value of James. Shortly after studying James 5, on healing, I persuaded members of my church to institute the practice. By God's grace, two of my closest friends and my youngest daughter were healed (two dramatically, one more gradually) when elders laid hands on them and prayed over them (I tell two of their stories in the final chapter). Since then I taught through James at my former home church, the Kirk of the Hills, at a city-wide men's Bible study hosted by Covenant Seminary, and at Central Presbyterian Church, where I am now senior pastor.

Unfortunately, James has had another kind of double status in the life of the church—beloved by ordinary Christians, but suspect among scholarly and critical communities. Critical studies of James owe much to Martin Luther, who, in one long paragraph in "Table Talk," enumerates the issues that have occupied critical scholars for centuries.[1]

First, Luther says, James contains almost nothing of Christ and the gospel. By this he meant that he found none of Paul's gospel of justification by faith. Instead he found an insistence on works that, so he thought, supported the Roman Catholic position on faith and works. Second, Luther says, James does not appear to be written by an apostle. Third, scholars say that the clear, confident style of James's Greek, the large vocabulary, and dense syntax, are

1. Martin Luther, "Table Talk," in *Luther's Works*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 54:424–25.

too refined to come from the hand of a Galilean Jew. Fourth, in a criticism that might contradict the previous one, Luther and others charge that James is disorderly, flitting from topic to topic without any proper connection of the thoughts. Finally, the early church did not immediately receive James as part of the New Testament canon.

Happily, ordinary Christians have to be "educated" in order to see these problems in James, which they take to be God's Word, full of the Lord's wisdom for daily life. Happily too, there are ready answers to each objection to James. First, while James does not have a theology of atonement, one wonders why a book must feature the substitutionary atonement in order to be canonical. Luther's criterion does not come from Scripture itself. Applied rigorously, it would excise several books from the canon. More importantly James does, in his own way, present Christ—as the Lord of the church, the teacher of right conduct, the one who offers grace to the humble. James describes the works that flow from faith in Christ and obedience to Jesus the Lord.

Second, to the charge that no apostle wrote James, we reply that only eight New Testament books were written by one of the Twelve: Matthew; John; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation. Like Mark, Luke, Acts, and Hebrews, to name just four examples, James is apostolic because its author was a member of the apostolic community, in direct contact and partnership with the apostles. He also witnessed parts of Jesus' life.

Third, to the charge that James's Greek is too good, scholars such as Stanley Porter have established that Greek was well known and well written in Palestine in the first century. Besides, much of the vocabulary and some of the style of James appear, as we might expect, to be influenced by the Greek of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament).

Fourth, to the charge that James is disorderly, flitting (so Martin Dibelius said) from topic to topic without connection: this charge reveals more about the ignorance of critics than about the ignorance of James. Diverse scholars such as Duane Watson and Luke Timothy Johnson have demonstrated that James uses and creatively adapts the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric. This is hardly a surprise, given the sophistication of James's Greek. Some will say it is too much for a Galilean, but "sophisticates" often underestimate the powers of lightly educated genius. As they doubt James, so they doubted that Shakespeare penned his plays or that Lincoln composed his speeches.

Finally, the early church's doubts about James are exaggerated. Eusebius did list James with disputed books, yet he clearly differentiated it from spurious or heretical books, noting its widespread recognition, its apostolic style, and its orthodox teaching.

Readers may think that a reply to James's critics is misplaced in the preface to an expository commentary. Yet the theological and moral value of James rests not upon the affection with which Christians receive it, but upon its origin, in divine inspiration, and its status in the canon. These are the issues at stake in any defense of the authorship, style, or content of James. The critical charges and the replies to them are far more involved than our brief survey indicates. But once accusations are presented, some of the faithful must answer them, and the church must at least know that they have done so—convincingly. Then all can profit from the theology and the ethic of James.

I dedicate this book to all who studied James with me at Geneva College, at Covenant Seminary, at Kirk of the Hills, and at Central Presbyterian Church. I especially thank four friends: Robert Yarbrough and Hans Bayer helped me think through the great issues in James; Robbie Griggs offered timely research assistance; and Rick Phillips reviewed each page, leading me to strengthen and clarify the book at many points.

James

Portrait of a Living Faith

1

Introduction to James

James 1:1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. (James 1:1)

or many believers, James is a beloved book. Eminently practical, it is full of vivid exhortations to godly living. In short compass it offers concrete counsel on an array of issues that confront Christians every day: trials, poverty and riches, favoritism, social justice, the tongue, worldliness, boasting, planning, prayer, illness, and more.

Yet James's candor and clarity are a two-edged sword. "Its call to realize professed ideals in appropriate action has spoken with prophetic urgency to generations of readers who have found James' directives difficult to perform rather than to understand."[1]

Assessing Failure and Faith

James, like the Sermon on the Mount, is sublime and penetrating—almost too penetrating. Its piercing assessment of our failures proves we cannot

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1995), 3.

achieve holiness by our striving. James stirs us to action, but as it reveals our sins, we doubt our ability to do what the writer commands. Yet James often declares that obedience is a hallmark of living faith: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (1:22).

James demands an obedience that honest readers know they cannot render. Therefore, while the individual sentences and paragraphs of James are clear, we struggle to resolve the tension between the stringency of James's demands and our inability to attain them. If this were Paul, he would turn our attention to redemption and justification. But James never mentions the cross or the atonement, the death or the resurrection of Christ. He never uses the gospel vocabulary of justification by faith, redemption, or reconciliation. Indeed, the absence of these elements prompts observers to wonder where Jesus and redemption are found in this letter. James does use Jesus' name twice, in 1:1 and 2:1, but on both occasions it is a passing reference rather than an exposition of his life and redemption. Similarly, while the term "faith" appears fourteen times in James, eleven of them occur in 2:14–26, a discussion that stresses that faith without deeds is dead (2:17, 26). If we want to hear the gospel of James, we must consider who James was.

The Life of James

James simply calls himself "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," but several lines of evidence indicate that he is the half-brother of Jesus, the natural son of both Mary and Joseph.[2] When the author calls himself James without further identification, it implies that his audience knows him and his credentials well enough.

There are three men named James in the New Testament: two apostles and the brother of Jesus. Of the apostles, James of the trio Peter, James, and John suffered martyrdom at the beginning of the Christian era. The second apostolic James is the son of Alphaeus. He is nearly a cipher in the Gospels, and we know nothing of him after the resurrection. So we doubt that he is our James.

The process of elimination leads us to think that the author is the brother of Jesus. But there is more. First, both the book of Acts and early Christian

2. For a complete discussion of James's identity, see Donald Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 723–46.

historians say Jesus' brother became a leader of the Jerusalem church. He is prominent at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). His speech there and the subsequent letter, both in Acts 15, contain a number of distinctive phrases that also appear in James's epistle.[3] James the church leader and James the epistle writer also share a passion for the law of Moses (Acts 15:21; James 2:8–11) and for peacemaking (Acts 15:28–29; James 3:17–18).

It is doubtful that James believed in or even respected Jesus in the early phases of his ministry. If, in Genesis 37, Joseph's brothers struggled with his sense that he was destined for greatness, imagine the difficulty of being Jesus' younger brother.[4] The Gospels hint at familial tension. For example, the first time John's gospel mentions Jesus' siblings, they mock him. The Feast of Tabernacles was approaching, and his brothers said: "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." John adds, "For even his own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:3–5). On another occasion, Jesus' family became alarmed when his ministry began to attract unruly crowds and to rouse opposition from the Pharisees. When they heard about it, Mark says, "They went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:20–22). Later, Jesus' family showed scant respect for his work when they arrived during a teaching session and acted as if they had the right to interrupt him (Matt. 12:46–50). Finally, when the gospels name those who stayed with Jesus at the cross, they list Mary his mother, but not his brothers (Mark 15:40; John 19:25).

It is impossible to determine when James came to faith. But Jesus, after his resurrection, graciously appeared to James, either to instill or to seal his faith (1 Cor. 15:3–8). After that, James rapidly became a pillar of the Jerusalem church. In Acts 15, when the church convened its first great council in Jerusalem, Peter and Paul described the terms and the progress of the gospel among the Gentiles. Both apostles preached that salvation came to Gentiles by faith alone, apart from works, apart from the laws about food

3. They include the rare use of *chairō* to signify a greeting (James 1:1; Acts 15:13), and "Listen my brothers" as an address (James 2:5; Acts 15:13). Three more relatively rare words appear in both James and Acts 15: *episkeptomai* (1:27 and 15:14), *epistrephō* (5:19–20 and 15:19), and *agapētos* (1:16; 1:19; 2:5; and 15:25).

4. If little James was naughty, did his parents say, "Why can't you be more like Jesus?"

and circumcision that established Jewish identity (Acts 10:34–11:18). Although some initially disagreed, the council established that Jew and Gentile are both saved "through the grace of our Lord Jesus" (15:11). At the council, James gave the concluding speech:

> Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:
>
> "After this I will return
> and rebuild David's fallen tent.
> Its ruins I will rebuild,
> and I will restore it,
> that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,
> and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
> says the Lord, who does these things." (Acts 15:13–17)

In the early church, James acquired the title "James the Just" because of his personal righteousness and his passion to promote righteousness in others. We see the same passion in James's epistle. He calls the law "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25) and "the royal law" (2:8). But the letter never asks readers to keep the laws regarding food, circumcision, and Sabbath that marked the Jews as an ethnic group. At the Jerusalem Council, James did urge adherence to some aspects of distinctively Jewish law (Acts 21:19–21), but it seems that his goal was peaceful relations in early church life as Jew and Gentile learned to live together as the family of God. At any rate, his letter never requires obedience to laws about circumcision or food. Thus James subordinated his passion for the law to his greater passion for the gospel. He had a zeal for legal righteousness, but greater zeal for the grace of God.

The Gospel according to James

With 59 commands in 108 verses, the epistle of James has an obvious zeal for law. In his imperatives, James directly communicates the royal law, the law of King Jesus (2:8). But the hasty reader will not see much of the gospel

in James. If James is merely a series of commands, its moral clarity is a burden, and its limpid commands only condemn. While James does lack familiar formulations of the gospel, his insistence on obedience is unmistakable. He says good deeds mark true religion:

> Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (1:27)
>
> Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. (2:10)
>
> Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. (4:17)
>
> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (1:22)

Similarly, James expects teachers to *do* what they know and say: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (3:1).

This call to obey or to face judgment is all the more stringent since James insists that everyone fails to do what the law requires. James says we must control the tongue (1:26), yet he says no man can tame the tongue (3:8). He says we must avoid the pollution of the world (1:27), yet he says our envy and our quarrels prove we are worldly (4:1–4).

These paradoxes lead to the gospel of James. He says that all are liable to judgment, but "mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13), for "the Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:11). If we see our sins and confess them, we will be healed (5:16). Further, whoever sees the sins of another and "turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (5:20). As I will argue in later chapters, the climax of James occurs in 4:6. James completes his indictment of human sin in 4:5, then says: "But [God] gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" The double mention of God's grace at the rhetorical climax of the book shows that the gospel of James is the message of God's grace for sinners.

James's emphasis on the word of God supplements this idea. Because the word convicts us of sin, James can say that God "chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (1:18). He says his readers should "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (1:21) because the word brings the message of grace.

The Voice of James

Vital as it is that we grasp the gospel of James, we also profit by hearing the distinctive voice of James. An observant Christian comparing Romans, Hebrews, and James will notice stylistic differences between James and the other epistles. For example, James neither opens nor closes with formal greetings. He makes no reference to personally shared history. Unlike Paul, James claims no authority or rank. Unlike Paul and Hebrews, James has little theological argumentation. Indeed, James can sound more like a prophet or wise man than like Paul.

James as a Book of Wisdom

Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs are called "wisdom literature." These books observe who is and who is not skilled in the art of living. Wisdom has been defined as "the discipline of applying truth to one's life in the light of experience."[5] It is "the knowledge of God's world and a knack of fitting oneself into it."[6] Wise animals know how to live well (Prov. 30:24–28). English translations vary, but the Hebrew Bible calls skilled people "wise" whether they are artisans (Ex. 31:3–6; 35:35; 1 Kings 7:14; Jer. 10:9), boatmen (Ezek. 27:8), or politicians (2 Sam. 13:3).[7]

James resembles wisdom books in important ways. James and Solomon agree that wisdom is a gift we rightly seek from God (1 Kings 3:7–12; James 1:5–8). They also agree that we can work for wisdom. Wisdom involves both

5. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 187.

6. Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 116.

7. R. E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Derek Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1985).

meditation on Scripture and observation of the world. This is why wisdom often says, "I have seen" (Job 5:3; Eccl. 1:14; 3:10; 5:13; 6:1; 9:11; 10:5, 7; ". . . observed," Job 4:8), or "Do you see?" (Prov. 22:29; 26:12; 29:20). Wisdom observes the blessings of obedience and the price of disobedience. James does the same. Building on biblical themes (James 2:8; 2:23; 4:5–6), James applies them to a stream of observations of daily life. He detects the way we snub the poor (2:1–4), the way we content ourselves with pious blather (2:14–17), the way our tongues run out of control (3:9–10), the way selfish desires lead to quarrels (4:1–4). There are also verbal parallels between James and Proverbs.[8]

James	**Proverbs**
The one who is rich . . . will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant. . . . In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. (1:10-11)	Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf. (11:28)
Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.(1:19-20)	A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly. (14:29) A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel. (15:18)
My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. (2:1)	It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice. (18:5)
We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. (3:2)	When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. (10:19)

8. Paul Achtemeier, Joel Green, and Marianne Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 501.

If James adopts elements of the style of wisdom, he also shares its interests: the roles of testing and discipline in creating wisdom, the power and the perversions of speech, the lure and emptiness of wealth, and the contrast between righteousness and wickedness.[9]

James as Prophetic Literature

The book of James is not essentially prophecy. But when James begins to denounce sin, he can sound like a prophet of old. He warns that God's judgment will shorten the life of the rich and lawless (James 1:11; 5:5). To rich oppressors, James says:

> Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. . . . Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you (5:1, 4–6).

This sounds a great deal like the prophets Isaiah and Amos.

> Woe to you who add house to house
>   and join field to field
> till no space is left
>   and you live alone in the land.
>
> The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing:
>
> "Surely the great houses will become desolate,
>   the fine mansions left without occupants." (Isa. 5:8–9)
>
> You trample on the poor
>   and force him to give you grain.
> Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
>   you will not live in them;

9. Ibid., 500.

though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine. . . .
You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.
(Amos 5:11–12; cf. Mic. 2:1–3)

James as Meditation on the Teachings of Jesus

James immersed himself in the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Though James never quotes Jesus, he constantly alludes to his words and applies them afresh.[10] James expresses the same themes in much the same language as Jesus. Consider these parallels:

- Love of neighbor is a great command (James 2:8 and Matt. 22:39).
- Self-exaltation leads to humiliation (James 4:6–10 and Matt. 23:12; cf. Luke 14:11; 18:9).
- Take no oaths (James 5:12 and Matt. 5:33–37).
- Do not judge (James 4:11–12 and Matt. 7:1–5).
- Moth and rust destroy riches (James 5:2 and Matt. 6:19).
- The Lord is coming; he is at the door (James 5:8–9 and Matt. 24:33).

As James meditates on Jesus' teaching, he also expresses similar themes in different language:

- Believers must rejoice in trials (James 1:2 and Matt. 5:11–12).
- The goal of the righteous is maturity (James 1:4 and Matt. 5:48).
- We ask God for good gifts (James 1:5 and Matt. 7:7).
- We are doers, not just hearers, of the word (James 1:22 and Matt. 7:24–27).
- Disciples must keep the whole law (James 2:10 and Matt. 5:19).
- We act upon our profession of faith (James 2:14–26 and Matt. 7:21–23).
- We are accountable for every word (James 3:2 and Matt. 12:36–37).
- Peacemakers are blessed (James 3:17–18 and Matt. 5:9).
- We cannot serve two friends or masters (James 4:4 and Matt. 6:24).

10. See Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 47–48; Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 55–57; and Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 729–30.

The Audience of James

At first glance, it seems that James is writing to Jews. After all, to translate literally, James addresses his epistle "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1 ESV). The twelve tribes traditionally represent Israel, and the dispersion signifies the Jews scattered throughout the pagan world. But there are reasons to think James is writing for Jewish Christians, not Jews in general. First, James is a *church* leader. Second, Paul and Peter established that the church is the true heir of God's promises to the tribes of Israel. Third, "dispersion" can serve as a metaphor to indicate that believers are never fully at home in this world (1 Peter 1:1, 17; 2:11; 1 Peter is also addressed to "the dispersion," but it is clear that his readers are mostly Gentiles). So there is reason to believe that James, like other New Testament writers, envisions a wide audience.[11]

Wherever his audience lives, James assumes they are familiar with life in Israel, for he often describes life from the perspective of a commoner in the towns of Judea or Galilee. For example, he mentions two rainy seasons, one early, one late; two rainy seasons are a distinct trait of the weather of Israel and the eastern Mediterranean. James also calls his meeting place a synagogue (2:2), he assumes that his audience takes pride in its monotheism, and he prods them to live their faith rather than resting in doctrinal rectitude (2:19ff.)

The Pastoral Spirit of James

Scholars address an array of additional themes when they introduce James. These include the structure, the canonicity, and the literary style of James, along with the date of its composition. Interested readers can consult standard introductions to the New Testament for these topics.[12] I especially recommend Luke Johnson's analysis of the style and structure of James and Doug Moo's analysis of its authorship and theology.[13]

11. Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing*, 497–79; Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 747–51.

12. See Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament* (at n. 2, above); Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament* (at n. 8, above); and Donald A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

13. Johnson, *The Letter of James*; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). These are both excellent commentaries.

Among such topics we may linger over one, the sermonic tone of James. James is a *letter*; it urges Christians to put their knowledge into practice by living out their professed devotion to Jesus. But James has the rhetorical texture of a sermon. We see that in James's use of direct address. He often calls his readers "my brothers" (e.g., 1:2; 2:1; 3:12; 5:12) or "my dear brothers" (e.g., 1:16; 2:5). Yet he can also address his audience as "you adulterous people" (4:4) or "you rich" (5:1).

James constantly engages his readers with rhetorical questions, sometimes in rapid sequences (2:4–7; 2:14–21; 3:11–13; 4:1–5; 4:12–14). James raises and answers objections that he supposes his readers may have (1:13; 2:18; 4:13–14; 5:13–14). An imaginary figure speaks on four occasions, to articulate a godless perspective toward poverty (2:3) or the needy (2:16) or business plans (4:13), or to object to James's teaching (2:18). The use of imaginary objectors implies that James thinks his audience could be more receptive to his message. He shows a godly impatience with the church on occasion, as he charges them, "Do not be deceived" (1:16 ESV), or "Come now" (4:3; 5:1 ESV). Elsewhere he questions them, "Do you want evidence?" (2:20 NIV), or "Do you not know?" (4:4 ESV).

James also engages his people with abundant illustrations, using horses, springs of water, boats, fire, mirrors, farm work, flowers, mist, travel, and Old Testament heroes. He creates an array of vivid images: desire becomes pregnant and gives birth to sin (1:15); demons believe and shudder (2:18); the rich howl, riches rot, and corroding metals eat flesh like fire (5:1–3). Finally, James speaks in paradox: tests are a joy (1:2), and the rich should boast in their humiliation (1:10).

The style and structure of the letter are often fascinating, but James always puts his rhetoric to the service of his goal: to promote a life consistent with faith in Christ the Lord. True heirs of the kingdom live like friends of God (2:5; 2:23). Genuine believers order their lives under the will and word of the Lord. Then, when they fail to meet the standard, they plead for grace. As James says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:10). That is the gospel of James.