

The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James

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The Epistle of James is notoriously difficult to outline. This is confirmed by the great diversity of the outlines which have been proposed. They range all the way from two¹ to twenty-five² major divisions. The epistle itself does not herald any clear structural plan concerning the organization of its contents. Hendriksen well remarks, "A superficial glance at this epistle may easily leave the impression that every attempt to outline it must fail."³

This impression that the epistle lacks any unifying theme for its contents is strengthened by the peculiar practice of James of connecting sentences by the repetition of a leading word or one of its cognates. As an illustration, note 1:3-6 (NASB) : "endurance" (v. 3) — "endurance" (v. 4) ; "lacking in nothing" (v. 4) — "if any of you lacks" (v. 5); "let him ask" (v. 5) — "but let him ask" (v. 6) ; "without any doubting" (v. 6) — "the one who doubts" (v. 6). See also 1:12-15, 21-25; 3:2-8; 4:1-3. The brief paragraphs, the rapid shift of thought, and the apparent diversity of themes further support the impression that the epistle is disjointed and lacks a unifying theme.

The disjointed character of its contents is stressed by scholars

¹ Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 341.

² Burton Scott Easton and Gordon Poterat, "The Epistle of James," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 12:18.

³ William Hendriksen, *Bible Survey: A Treasury of Bible Information* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 329.

who view this book as simply another example of "parenesis." "It was characteristic of parenesis," Songer remarks, "to place together in loose organization a series of exhortations without any concern to develop one theme or line of thought in the entire writing."⁴ The term *paraenesis* or *parenesis*, derived from the Greek **parainesij** means "exhortation, advise, counsel" (cf. Acts 27:9, 22). As applied to a written work, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "a hortatory composition." In modern usage it denotes material characterized by ethical instruction and exhortation.

Those who view the Epistle of James as typical parenetic literature hold that no unifying theme should be expected; it should rather be accepted as a collection of miscellaneous exhortations devoid of any intentional unity. Thus Goodspeed describes the epistle as "just a handful of pearls, dropped one by one into the hearer's mind."⁵ And Hunter, recalling that the epistle had been called "an ethical scrapbook," concludes that "it is so disconnected, as it stands, that it is the despair of the analyst."⁶

But others, not yielding to despair, discern some measure of organizational unity in holding that James discusses several independent themes. Scroggie asserts that this epistle "has no one subject as have most of the Epistles, more than a dozen themes being treated almost disconnectedly," and goes on to remark, "The nature and variety of these subjects suggest that they are abstracts of sermons which James had preached at Jerusalem."⁷ Shepherd sees the epistle as consisting of "a series of eight homiletic-didactic discourses" with each discourse developing a principle theme linked together by "skilful use of word-links and thematic recapitulations."⁸ Similarly Barker, Lane, and Michaels hold that this epistle is a series of "sermonic expansions of certain sayings of Jesus" and that in it "four brief homilies or messages have been merged into one: on temptation (1:2-18), on the law of love (1:19-2:26), on evil speaking (3:1-4:12), and on endurance (4:13-5:20)."⁹

⁴ Harold S. Songer, "James," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, 12 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 12:102.

⁵ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 290.

⁶ A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), p. 96.

⁷ W. Graham Scroggie, *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption: The Bible as a Whole*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 3:290.

⁸ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., "The Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 75 (1956):41.

⁹ Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 329.

The suggestion that the contents of this book originally had a sermonic origin is very probable. But the view that Jesus, the dynamic leader of the Jerusalem church, should dispatch such a heterogeneous compilation of sermonic materials as his official message to his readers seems less probable.

Still others hold that all of the Epistle of James does indeed relate to a single theme which gives it an unobtrusive unity. This unifying thrust of the epistle is obviously ethical rather than doctrinal. Kee, Young, and Froehlich identify this unifying thrust as follows: "The whole epistle is concerned with one simple truth: It is not enough to 'be' a Christian, if this fact does not show in one's conduct."¹⁰ McNeile identifies this unifying thread of the epistle as "the obvious but important truth that a man's faith, his attitude toward God, is unreal and worthless if it is not effective, if it does not work practically in life."¹¹ And Lenski well identifies the unifying theme of the epistle when he asserts, "This entire epistle deals with Christian faith, and shows how this faith should be genuine, true, active, living, fruitful."¹²

The Epistle of James has much to say about faith. The noun faith **pistij** occurs sixteen times¹³ and the verb believe **pisteuw** three times.¹⁴ But a glance at the contents of the epistle makes it obvious that James is not concerned with developing a theological exposition of the nature of Christian faith. He holds that a saving faith accepts Jesus Christ as the all-sufficient Savior (1:1; 2:1), but otherwise he says but little about the theological content of such a faith. His purpose is practical rather than doctrinal.

The purpose of James is to goad his readers to recognize and accept their need for a living, active faith and to challenge them to test their own faith by the basic criterion that "faith without works is useless" (2:20). James insists that a saving faith is a living faith, proving its genuineness by what it does. But it is a misconception to assume that his purpose is simply to stress the

¹⁰ Howard Clark Kee, Franklin W. Young, and Karlfried Froehlich, *Understanding the New Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 379.

¹¹ A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 189.

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), p. 538.,

¹³ 1:3, 6; 2:1, 5, 14 (twice), 17, 18 (thrice), 20, 22 (twice), 24, 26; 5:15.

¹⁴ 2:19 (twice), 23.

importance of good works. James is not advocating works apart from faith, but he is vitally concerned to show that a living faith must demonstrate its dynamic character by its deeds.

The contents of the epistle, further, make it clear that James is not content simply to establish the abstract truth that a saving faith is a dynamic, productive faith. His purpose is practical, to present a series of tests whereby his readers can determine the genuineness of their own faith. "The testing of your faith" (1:3) seems to be the key which James left hanging at the front door, intended to unlock the contents of the book. This writer proposes that *tests of a living faith* is indeed the unifying theme of the epistle and that it provides ready access to its contents.

A SURVEY OF JAMES

The opening salutation (1:1) stamps this document as an epistolary communication. Whatever may have been the initial use of this material, the author now employs that material to achieve his epistolary purpose. He is intent on meeting the needs of his readers.

In 1:2-18 James states and discusses his theme. This paragraph is basic to a proper understanding of the thrust of the epistle. For James "faith," the subject of his opening sentence (1:2-3), is central to the Christian life and its true energizing principle. It is essential, therefore, that its genuineness be tested. "The testing of your faith" (1:3) marks the basic thrust of the message. The Greek noun **peirasmōj** has a double meaning, "testing" and "temptation." Since in human experience the two aspects are often related, James discusses both in this opening section. In verses 2-12 he deals with the tests and trials of believers, while in verses 13-16 he discusses the nature of temptation and then shows that it cannot come from God in view of His beneficent activities in human experience (1:17-18).

In order to profit from the testings of their faith, believers must rightly evaluate their testings (1:2-4). Prayer makes available to them the needed wisdom to profit from their testings (1:5); but such prayer must be unmixed with doubt and hesitancy (1:6-8). The testing of their faith equalizes believers (1:9-11), and successful endurance assures future reward (1:12).

In human experience testing and temptation are often closely related. Temptation has its source in lustful human nature and

must not be blamed on God (1:13-14). Its nature and results (1:15-16) prove that it is not from God who acts beneficently in human experience (1:17-18). His greatest gift to man is His work of regeneration through His Word.

Having identified and discussed his theme, in the remainder of the epistle James develops a series of tests whereby the readers may seek to purify their own faith.

FAITH TESTED BY ITS RESPONSE TO THE WORD OF GOD (1:19-27)

Since God's Word is the means of regeneration (1:18), a right response to the Word is appropriately presented as the initial test of a vital faith. For the believer to accept regeneration through the Word is one thing; to permit the Word to work spiritual maturity in him is another.

The necessary response is threefold: eagerness to hear it, restraint on any premature reaction, bridling of any angry rejection (1:19-20). Before the Word can have full sway in the believer's life, he must remove all that hinders its operation (1:21).

Acceptance of the Word must be followed by persistent obedience to the Word (1:22-27). Hearing must be followed by active obedience; otherwise the hearing is useless (1:22-25). But obedience to the Word is more than mere observance of outward forms of "religion" (church attendance, rote prayers, participation in the rites of religion) without the development of inner power to control the tongue (1:26). True obedience to the Word must reveal itself in beneficent social activity and stimulate personal self-control and purity in separation from worldly contamination (1:27).

FAITH TESTED BY ITS REACTION TO PARTIALITY (2:1-13)

The second test of a living faith, as an unfolding of "pure and undefiled religion" (1:27), is drawn from the worship services of James' readers. James administers a stinging rebuke for holding "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism" (2:1). Their partiality, vividly pictured in verses 2-3, must be stopped as inconsistent with Christian faith.

The evil consequences of their partiality are expounded in verses 5-11. It is a false reaction toward both the rich and the poor (2:5-7) and is a breach of the law of love (2:8-11). Their act of partiality breaks the law of love and makes them guilty of violating the purpose of the whole law as an expression of God's will.

Their faith demands a life in accordance with the law of liberty (2:12-13). They must obey the liberating law of love in

word and deed in view of the coming judgment. The practice of mercy, giving a man what he needs and not what he deserves, will reveal that God's grace has produced a transformation in their own lives.

FAITH TESTED BY ITS PRODUCTION OF WORKS (2:14-26)

Faith and works are mentioned together ten times in this paragraph, but the stress throughout is on their interrelationship. The rhetorical questions of verse 14 state the theme of this further test. A saving faith is a working faith, proving its vitality by its production of works.

James insists that an inactive faith is useless (2:14-17). The rendering, "Can faith save him?" (AV) confuses the point of this test. The question is literally, "Can that faith save him" (i.e., a faith without works), and the question implies a strong no answer. Not faith, but an inoperative faith, is disparaged. Verses 15-16 vividly illustrate such a faith, and verse 17 states the categorical conclusion.

James further insists that even an orthodox creed apart from works is barren (2:18-20). The interpretation of verse 18 is problematic. From the context it is clear that James insists that even an orthodox, monotheistic faith, if it does not motivate conduct, is demonic (2:19). The faith of the demons stirs their feelings but does not change their conduct. James challenges his opponent to recognize that a faith which does not produce works is "useless," barren like a field that produces no crop (2:20).

Verses 21-25 establish from Scripture that saving faith manifests itself in works. The proof is drawn from the stories of Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25). James is not teaching that salvation is partly by faith and partly by works. Rather, both were justified by their faith, but their faith demonstrated its living nature in what it enabled them to do.

The analogy in verse 26 states the essence of this test of a living faith. As a body without the spirit of life in it is dead, so a profession of faith without deeds is lifeless. An inactive faith, entombed in an intellectually approved creed, has no more saving power than a lifeless corpse.

FAITH TESTED BY ITS PRODUCTION OF SELF-CONTROL (3:148)

In chapter 3, a self-contained unit, James insists that a living faith must operate in the inner life of the believer in producing

self-control. And this self-control is most readily tested by one's use of his tongue.

Verses 1-2 stress the importance of a controlled tongue. It is of special importance for the teacher; because of his tremendous influence, conveyed through the tongue, he will be held more strictly accountable (3:1). Since all believers stumble, all need self-control (3:2). Perfect control of the tongue is the mark of a mature man, one able to exercise control in all areas of his life.

Verses 3-6 establish the importance of a controlled tongue. Two illustrations demonstrate the importance and need for properly applied control (3:3-4), while verse 5a applies the principle to the boasting tongue. Verses 5b-6 illustrate the damage of an uncontrolled tongue. It is an aggressive and destructive force if left uncontrolled.

Man's natural inability to control the tongue is illustrated and affirmed in verses 7-8. Human nature has asserted control over all kinds of creatures, but effective control of the tongue is an impossible human achievement. Its restless nature and deadly impact make this so tragic.

James rebukes the inconsistency of an uncontrolled tongue (3:9-12). It is a veritable Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Such inconsistent usage is utterly unfit for believers (3:10b). The world of nature is not guilty of such duplicity (3:11-12).

The tongue of man does not operate independently; its use reveals the inner spirit in control. Verses 13-18 discuss the two types of "wisdom" competing for control of man's tongue. "Wisdom" is more than intellectual apprehension; it is a moral quality, enabling man to make moral evaluations and decisions in life.

Challenging his readers to identify a "wise and understanding" man in their midst (3:13), James identifies the nature and results of the two spirits seeking to control the inner man. Verses 14-16 describe the marks, nature, and results of the false "wisdom" in control; by contrast verses 17-18 delineate the results when heavenly wisdom is in control of the believer's tongue. Its seven characteristics (3:17) as well as its fruit (3:18) establish that a saving faith must be controlled by such a heavenly wisdom.

FAITH TESTED BY ITS REACTIONS TO WORLDLINESS (4:1-5:12)

Since faith is a matter of trust or dependence on something or someone outside oneself, one's center of dependence in actual life is of crucial importance. Worldliness places self or the things of the world at the center of his aspirations and activities. "The worldly

person is the self-centered person."¹⁵ Worldliness manifests itself in various and often subtle ways among believers. Four specific manifestations of worldliness are treated by James.

Worldliness manifested through strife and faction (4:1-12). The quarrels and conflicts of believers are evidence of their worldliness (4:1-3). Their self-centered pleasures are like soldiers going to war against those who thwart the fulfilment of their selfish desires. Two parallel sets of consequences delineate the outcome of their worldliness (4:2a). The two series are clearly marked by the punctuation in the New American Standard Version. Two incriminating reasons, standing side by side as alternative explanations, explain their turbulent relations (4:2b-3).

In verses 4-6 worldliness is sharply rebuked. It is in reality spiritual adultery (4:4). Cultivation of the friendship of "the world," the masses of unredeemed humanity in their self-centered indifference or hostility to God, proves that God does not have the believer's undivided allegiance. It is a position of acting as an enemy of God. Such an attitude violates the teaching of Scripture (4:5a) and evokes God's jealousy (4:5b). He jealously yearns for the believer's undivided attention and in grace desires his return (4:6)

Verses 7-12 are a ringing exhortation to worldly-minded believers. They must resume a right relationship to God (4:7-10). Verse 7 states the basic requirement, while verses 8-10 elaborate the specific demands for a return to a right relationship with God. They must also resume a right relationship to their brethren by terminating their censoriousness toward one another (4:11-12).

Worldliness manifested through presumptuous planning (4:13-17). The worldliness here censured is that of presumptuous planning in independence from God. James is not condemning intelligent planning for the future; he is rebuking that arrogant planning which formulates its course of action in disregard of God. "Come now" (4:13) calls for attention to what follows. Verses 13-14 rebuke the wrong attitude. It is the picture of the self-confident business man projecting his course of action for a whole year in advance. He arrogantly assumes that the unknown future is under his control.

Verse 15 points out the proper attitude: There must be a willing submission to God's will, involving not only one's continued life but also one's future planned activities.

¹⁵ J. A. Moyter, *The Tests of Faith* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p. 82.

The present attitude of James' readers is evil because of their arrogance (4:16). They presume to control the future in independence of God. It is a failure to conform their conduct to their professed relationship to God. Knowledge of what is right and the ability to do it involves obligation; failure to do it is sin (4:17).

Worldliness manifested in wrong reaction to injustice (5:1-11).

The two parts of this section stand in remarkable contrast. In verses 1-6 James utters a stinging prophetic denunciation of the cruelty and oppression of the world, while verses 7-11 aim at safeguarding believers against a worldly reaction to such experiences of injustice. James strongly denounces social injustices but is concerned that believers maintain a proper attitude and perspective amid such injustices. They test the believer's faith.

The denunciation of the oppressive rich (5:1-6) is in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. James gives no indication that he regards these rich persons as being Christians. There is no call to repentance but simply the announcement of impending doom.

Verse 1 announces the fact of impending judgment and the resultant emotional reactions. The impact of the judgment is described in verses 2-3. Their wealth in its various forms will have lost its value and will be a means of torment for their possessors. Three charges are made against them: their oppression of the laborers (5:4), their self-indulgence (5:5), and their violent treatment of the unresisting righteous individual (5:6).

James next counsels and encourages his afflicted brethren (5:7-11). He urges patience and inner stability in view of the expected return of the Lord (5:7-8), warns against unjustified complaints and irritability against fellow believers (5:9), and encourages them with examples of past suffering and endurance under affliction (5:10-11).

Worldliness manifested in self-serving oaths (5:12). Those who see no unifying theme in this epistle find "not the remotest connection between this verse and the section that has gone just before."¹⁶ Minear would explain this lack of connection as due to the fact that "we are dealing with an unorganized jumble of oral tradition which the editor felt no pressure to reorder into a smoother literary sequence."¹⁷ But those who reject the view that its contents con-

¹⁶ W. E. Oesterley, "The General Epistle of James," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (reprint; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), 4:472.

¹⁷ Paul S. Minear, "Yes or No: The Demand for Honesty in the Early Church," *Novum Testamentum* 13 (January 1971):7.

stitute "an unorganized jumble" and accept a unifying theme for the whole epistle find there is reason and significance in the inclusion of this exhortation at this point.

The words "But above all" seem best understood as marking the conclusion of a line of thought which James has been pursuing and call for attention to this important concluding matter. Having censured three different manifestations of worldliness (4:1-5:11), this exhortation deals with the spirit of worldliness in one of its most reprehensible forms. The Jews had learned the fine art of concealing the truth under an oath with their hair-splitting distinctions between binding and nonbinding oaths (Matt. 5:33-37; 23:16-22). Such self-serving oaths, used to hide the truth by appearing to appeal to God to establish the truth, were totally inconsistent with Christian honesty. The truthfulness of their word must stand open and unquestioned.

FAITH TESTED BY ITS RESORT TO PRAYER (5:13-18)

James brings his tests of a living faith to a logical conclusion by insisting that Christian faith finds its center and power in a vital relationship with God in prayer in all the experiences of life (5:13). Prayer constitutes the very heart of a vital Christian faith.

In verses 14-16a this response is specifically applied to the experience of physical sickness. The "sick," the one physically weak, is to take the initiative by summoning "the elders," the recognized leaders of the local church. Their prayer for the sick is to be offered in connection with an act of anointing with oil, probably as an aid to faith. From verse 15 it is clear that the prayer, not the oil, is viewed as the healing means. "The prayer offered in faith" (5:15) apparently denotes a prayer prayed in the Spirit-wrought conviction that it is God's will to heal the one prayed for. The sickness may be due to sin, but the construction in the original makes it clear that this is not always the case. The results of prayer encourage the practice of mutual confession and prayer (5:16a). The practice removes any possible hindrance to the free operation of God's power.

In verses 16b-18 James encourages the practice of prayer through his positive assertion of its power (5:16b) and his illustration of its mighty impact (5:17-18).

The last two verses (5:19-20) seem best viewed as forming a conclusion to the entire epistle. "If any among you strays from the truth" (5:19) seems to take a final look at the various evils

which James has censured in the entire epistle. The verb "turns him back" **epissteiw** seems best understood as relating to a believer who has erred from the path of God's truth. Such straying is a serious matter. The one acting to restore the erring one is assured that he has saved his erring brother and thereby a multitude of sins are covered, rather than exposed to open judgment (5:20).

SUMMARY

This survey of James suggests that the key which is found hanging at the front door (1:3) is indeed the proper key to unlock the structure of the epistle. The use of the key, tests of a living faith, has readily unlocked the door and given ready access to its various chambers. Not only does it give ready access to all parts of the house but it also brings into conscious display the fact of the underlying unity of the whole. Its use gives unity and coherence to the entire epistle. It displays the full harmony of this epistle with the rest of the New Testament. James, like Paul, fully believed in "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

This understanding of the Epistle of James heightens its practical and timely message. The author's stern insistence on Christian practice consistent with Christian profession, his open contempt for all sham, and his stinging rebukes of worldliness in its varied forms are notes that are urgently needed in Christendom today. As long as there are professed Christians who are prone to separate profession and practice, the message of this epistle will continue to be relevant.

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