

TRUE PIETY IN JAMES: ETHICAL ADMONITIONS AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

DAVID S. DOCKERY
Criswell College, Dallas, TX 75201

I. Introduction

In the most practical book in the NT, we might expect to find a consistent exposition of ethical principles. But James does not present a systematic treatise. In fact, the subjects that are treated are quite different from the dominant ethical injunctions in other parts of the NT. Distinctive is the fact that his entire letter is occupied with ethical admonitions and is not intertwined with doctrinal passages in the pattern of Paul's letters. Our purpose in this essay is to survey briefly the major ethical admonitions in James and thus discover his understanding of true piety. In doing this, we shall note exegetical-theological foundations along the way as they inform the ethical teachings, but our primary concern in this article is neither exegesis nor theology. We shall attempt to discuss some of the theological and ethical issues that are important for the contemporary church and in conclusion will consider some of these implications. It is important also to note that our treatment will try to avoid overlap and restatement of the other articles in this issue. We recognize that the subjects of "trials and testing," "faith and works," "wisdom" and "prayer," not to mention a broad "theological/christological survey" have been treated in fine fashion. Therefore our concentration will focus on other issues as: "practicing the word," "problems of partiality and poverty," "control of the tongue," "vices and virtues," and "worldliness." We shall then note implications of these themes for such contemporary concerns as: "biblical inerrancy," "church renewal," "the church growth movement," "social responsibility," and "liberation theology."

II. *Situation and Context*

James is the name of the author of this epistle, however this does not identify him specifically. James was an extremely common name in the first century; in fact there are six different men identified as James in the NT.¹ Of these, the two most probable options are James, son of Zebedee, who was one of the twelve apostles and James, the Lord's brother. James, son of Zebedee, was martyred in A.D. 44 (cf. Acts 12:1-12) which would place the correspondence quite early. The better option based upon external and internal evidence, is that the author is James, the Lord's brother.² This was the view of Origin (ca. 185-253), Eusebius (ca. 265-340) and Jerome (ca. 340-420). The emphasis on practice, conduct and ethical concerns that are characteristic of the epistle agree with the other NT pictures of James (Acts 21:11 -25 and Gal 2:12). The description of "James the Just" by Hegesippus (cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23) is an appropriate picture for the author of this epistle who is concerned with justice and righteousness similar to the OT prophet Amos.³ Also tone of the epistle, which includes forty-six imperatives, harmonizes well with the authority exercised by James in Acts 15:13; 21:18 and the vocabulary in the letter is similar to the speech of James in Acts 15:13-29.

The date of the letter must have been written prior to A.D. 62/63 when according to Josephus, James was martyred. Some argue for a date near the end of James' life, but a strong case can be offered for a

¹ (1) Son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19; Acts 1:13); (2) Son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18; Acts 1:13); (3) James the Less (Mark 15:40); (4) Father of Judas (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13); (5) Brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3; Acts 12:11; 15:13; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12; 1 Cor 15:1); (6) Brother of Jude (Jude 1). Cf. J. J. Gunther, "The Family of Jesus," *EvQ* 46:1 (1974) 25-41. It should be noted that primarily, the translations used in this article are from the NIV.

² These issues are discussed in most major NT introductions and commentaries on James. Two very helpful works are R. P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1918) 2.358-65; and D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970) 736-70. Our conclusions on these introductory matters are largely based upon Guthrie's findings. Others who have made a case for James, the Lord's brother, as author of this epistle include R. H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1910) 342-44; and E. F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 363-66. F. Spitta posed that the letter was a thoroughly Jewish document that had undergone a minor Christian revision in "Der Brief des Jakobus," *Zur Geschichte und Literatur des Urchristentums* (2 vols.; Gottingen: V and R1896) 2.1-155. A. Meyer (1930) and H. Windisch (1930) followed this argument, but it has now been almost completely abandoned.

³ This reference is cited by D. Burdick, "James" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. C. Gaebelein (12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12.161.

date around or before A.D. 50.⁴ It is difficult to make a definite decision and it is really beyond the scope of our topic to discuss the issue in detail.

The epistle's readers are identified as "twelve tribes scattered among the nations." There are several indications that James is writing to ethnic Jews; the twelve tribes thus designate the entirety of the Jewish nation. Evidently James, the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem Church, was writing to Jewish believers who were driven out of Jerusalem during the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen. These believers were dispersed over Samaria (Acts 8:1), Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:19). It is possible that James, the elder, would feel responsible for these "former parishioners and attempt to instruct them somewhat as he would have done had they still been under his care in Jerusalem."⁵ He writes to instruct and exhort them.

This series of instructions and exhortations was analyzed by M. Dibelius through form-critical analysis and determined that it belonged to a special genre called paranesis.⁶ Paranesis assembled a series of ethical admonitions without a definite context. Dibelius viewed the letter as a group of loosely-arranged sayings and brief hortatory sections. A. Schlatter advanced this line of thinking by connecting the letter of James with the paranesis of Jesus, emphasizing the Beatitudes.⁷ Whether or not we accept these theories completely, it is certain that the emphasis of James' epistle is its practical concerns. This does not mean it lacks theology.⁸ As we have noted, he makes no special effort to ground his ethical injunctions in theological revelation, yet he presupposes the possibility of obedience to the admonitions because of an underlying theology.⁹

III. Ethical Admonitions

The major feature of the ethical instruction of James is his reminiscence of the teachings of Jesus and the exhortations of the OT

⁴ Cf. D. E. Hiebert, *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith* (Chicago: Moody, 1979) 39-41. Our leanings favor an early date, A.D. 48-49.

⁵ Burdick, "James" 163.

⁶ M. Dibelius, *James*, rev. H. Greeven (Hermeneia: Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 3; cf. S. Songer, "James" *Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. C. J. Allen (12 vols.; Nashville: Broadman, 1972) 12.102.

⁷ Ibid.; A. Schlatter, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1932) 9-19.

⁸ Hiebert, *Epistle of James* 45.

⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Message of James" *SJT* 18 (1965) 182-93; and G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 589, who says that "a theologian can write practical homilies."

prophets. He provides practical advice for a broad range of topics. It can be postulated that the model for his instruction is the life of Jesus (cf. Jas 3:17). As several commentators have noted, the book is so exclusively practical it is impossible to address every specific issue. We shall therefore limit our concerns to descriptions of the passages that focus on the five previously mentioned themes.

Practicing the Word 1:18-25

Responding. The readers are admonished with a proverb: "Every one should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (1:19). This is an interesting and important, almost shocking word for modern men and women in this "express-your-feelings" era.¹⁰ The person who is prepared to respond to the word is not the one who always has something to say, but the person who listens to others and prayerfully and carefully speaks. The beginning of wisdom is cautious listening rather than quick speech and sharp denunciation. After getting rid of anger, filthy habits and wicked conduct (1:20-21), the believers are prepared to accept the word planted in them which can save them (1:21). This is to be done "humbly" in submission to God (1:21). The word had already been implanted in these people for they were part of the believing community. The acceptance of the word means to "commit oneself to Jesus and his teaching, and such a commitment is the changed lifestyle James is seeking."¹¹

Living in Tension. It is clearly evident in James that the believing community lives in tension between the "already" and the "not yet."¹² By the divine will they became members of God's redeemed people (1:18) through the means of the implanted word (1:21). Yet, believers are subject to temptations and trials (1:2) that may cause some of them to wander from the faith (5:19). Still they anticipate the parousia of Christ when they will inherit the kingdom of God (2:5) and enter into eternal life.¹³

Hearing and Doing. In this interim period, it is imperative that believers must hear and do the word, so as not to be deceived (1:22). The word for doers (*ποιηταί*) occurs four times in James and only twice in the rest of the NT (Acts 17:28 where it is translated "poets" and Rom 2:13). This typifies James' continuing emphasis on living out the word implanted. The one who "listens to the word but does not do

¹⁰ P. H. Davids, *James* (GNC; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) 14.

¹¹ Ibid., 15; cf. the discussion on "the implanted word" in J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 98-100. "

¹² Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* 591. This is denied by R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, ed. K. Grobel (2 vols.; New York: Scribners, 1951-55) 2.163.

¹³ Ladd, *ibid.*

what it says" (1:23) is compared to someone who looks into the mirror, goes away and forgets what he or she looks like (1:24). The point is that if this is where it ends with Scripture, one's learning about the Bible has only as much value as one's morning glimpse into the mirror.¹⁴ J. B. Mayor suggests that the imperfect knowledge gained through reflection in the mirror contrasts with the perfect knowledge of reality.¹⁵ It is also possible that a good look in the mirror would not only make evident one's superficiality, but also "one's moral needs as reflected in the ugly traces of sin on his face."¹⁶

Jas 1:25 makes the important contrasts between the "doer" and the mere "hearer." The hearers simply listen and forget which is not so much a loss of memory but a neglect to put the teaching into practice. The doers "will be blessed of God" because they put into practice what is heard. James emphasizes the action as an enduring occupation. We need to notice the eschatological aspect of the blessing (cf. the future tense of the verb *ἔσται*).

The law that the "doers" follow and study is one of "freedom." It is within the Jewish world by which we can understand this phrase. P. Davids observes that this does not mean the Stoic rule of reason or the Jewish law, but the OT scriptures interpreted and perfected by the Messiah.¹⁷ The Sermon on the Mount¹⁸ (e.g., Matt 5:17) and other gospel passages present Christ as the giver of the renewed law.¹⁹ The liberty then follows from the inner character of the law (cf. Jer 31:31-34).²⁰ Liberty is not license but the ability to live and fulfill the law of Christ. The law brings freedom by submission to Christ. Thus believers who practice the word are freed from bondage to sin and death, as well as legalism, and will be blessed by God.

Piety, Partiality and Poverty 1:26-2:13; 5:1-6

Piety. Vv 26 and 27 of chap. 1 serve as a transition between the opening idea on the practice of the word and the next statement that confronts the problem of partiality. This transition section turns the

¹⁴ Davids, *James* 16.

¹⁵ J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954) 71.

¹⁶ T. B. Maston, *Biblical Ethics* (Macon: Mercer, reprint 1982) 259.

¹⁷ P. H. Davids, *Commentary on James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 99.

¹⁸ Cf. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964); Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age and/or the Age to Come* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1952). Also see the very helpful comments in J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 69-81.

¹⁹ C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 72.

²⁰ D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 698-99.

focus to true piety. The question before the readers penetrates their inner being by asking if they consider themselves religious ($\deltaοκεῖ$ = to seem in their own estimation). The readers may want to answer the question in a positive way based upon religious observances and performance of religious duties. The activity and service may be fine but the value may be hindered or even lost because the religious person does not tame his or her tongue (1:26).

Such persons may carefully use right words in religious ceremony and service, but be careless with speech at other times. As J. Calvin notes, "he who seems brilliant with some outward show of sanctity will set himself off by defaming others, and this under the pretense of zeal but really through the lust of slander."²¹ James, with echoes of the Lord's words in Matt 15:8, 9, declares such religion "worthless" (1:26).

In v 27, the readers learn the meaning of true piety with words that again echo the teachings of Jesus (cf. Matt 25:36-43). Piety involves two aspects: (1) the personal service of "looking after orphans and widows in distress" and (2) personal holiness which is a perpetual striving "to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." R. V. G. Tasker accurately summarizes:

The believer must never be blind to his duty to express his faith in love, but at the same time, in the midst of all the distracting and demoralizing influences of the world around him, which lies wholly in the evil one, he must keep himself pure by continual remembrance of the demands of the all-holy God.²²

Partiality and Poverty. The themes of 1:26-27 are amplified in 2:1-13. Worldliness, identified as slander in 1:26, is expanded to include improper favoritism that is shown to someone's worldly power and position rather than viewing the person's worth based upon one's spiritual relationship to Christ. The "care of widows and orphans" is related to the issues of poverty and generous caring for those in need. This section is certainly applicable to the readers of James' epistle in all ages. It is especially relevant for the contemporary churches that are concerned with status and power and who have perverted the true gospel with promises of success and material prosperity.

The readers are addressed as church members ($\alphaδελφοί$). J. B Phillips offers this paraphrase of v 1, "Don't ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." The essence of the passage is that true piety is incompatible with partiality. The

²¹ J. Calvin, *Matthew, Mark and Luke, James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison and ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (CNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 273.

²² R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Tyndale: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 55.

term for partiality ($\piροσωπολημψία$) "was coined by the Christian ethical tradition on the basis of the OT statements about God and applied especially to God's judgment (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Pet L17)."²³ Showing partiality based on one's cultural status is in direct opposition to the very character of God. James applies his teaching to one particular concern: the different treatment of the rich and poor in the Christian assembly ($συναγωγήν$). The rich man in v 2 is never called "rich" in the NT Greek text. He is literally "the gold-fingered one" ($χρυσοδακτύλιος$) suggesting a finger completely covered with gold rings.²⁴ The sign of wealth was demonstrated by the wearing of many rings on one hand with great ostentation.²⁵

The favoritism is demonstrated by the different ways that the rich person and the poor person are treated as they enter the assembly.²⁶ The text suggests that the rich person enters first and is granted an important seat. The poor person then enters and is told to "stand there or sit on the floor" (2:3). J. H. Ropes insightfully notes that both rich and poor visitors are undoubtedly non-Christians.²⁷ Thus, the stinging question follows in v 4 where James asks if such treatment does not prove that they have discriminated by judging a person's quality and worth based upon class distinctions.

God's impartiality is shown through his choosing the poor of this world to be rich in faith (2:5). On this basis, God demands equal esteem for the poor.²⁸ It is important to note that poverty is not implicitly advantageous in God's kingdom, but that God is no respecter of persons and therefore his people should not be.²⁹ Not only does the church lack God's perspective, but it seemingly acts irresponsibly and irrationally. The church has shown partiality to the rich: (1) who are its

²³ Davids, *James* 44; cf. E. Lohse, " $\piροσωλημψία$ " *TDNT* 6 (1968) 779-80.

²⁴ Hiebert, *James* 151.

²⁵ Cf. J. Scanzoni, "The Man with the Gold-Ringed Finger" *Eternity* 14:8 (1963) 11-13.

²⁶ The context is limited and therefore very difficult to reconstruct the life situation. Dibelius, *James* 128, in stressing a paracetic concept says that this setting is hypothetical and cannot actually be a church meeting. Some such as R. B. Ward, "Partiality in the Assembly: James 2:2-4" *HTR* 62:1 (1969) 87-97, maintain that the scene is a judicial assembly for the purpose of judging a case between a rich and poor member. The most likely assumption is that the scene represents a worship service in the early church that was open to the general public.

²⁷ J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1916) 191.

²⁸ H. H. Esser, "Poor" *DNTT* 2 (1978) 825-26; cf. J. C. Mover, "Poor" *ZPEB* 4 (1975) 820-21.

²⁹ Cf. Maston, *Biblical Ethics* 15-51.

oppressors; (2) who drag them before judges; and (3) who speak evil of the good name given to the believers. Although oppression of the poor is strongly condemned in the OT (Exod 22:25-26; Deut 24:14-15; Jer 1:6; Amos 4:1; 8:4; Mal 3:5), it is the third charge that is the most serious. The name of Jesus was given to the believers at their conversion and the rich were speaking evil of this name. Perhaps these insults were taking place in the courts, combining the second and third charges.

Regardless, the church had wrongly identified with the rich and set themselves in opposition to God who has chosen the poor to inherit the kingdom. It is often the case that an oppressed group takes on the characteristics of its oppressors. "When this happens to the church, it is not just pathetically ironic but it is a moral reversal, for the people who name the name of Christ are now acting like the people who blaspheme the name of Christ."³⁰

James then proceeds to relate the present problem of favoritism to the "royal law" (2:9; cf. Lev 19:18), a law that was applicable to both rich and poor. The royal law is the law of the kingdom as given by Jesus. The specific statement, "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a favorite of Jesus (the gospel writers total six times that these words are found in the sayings of Jesus) and Paul (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:13-14). It is the supreme law, the essence of kingdom ethics. Partiality violates this law and is sin (2:9) since "it contravenes the will of God by discriminating against the poor, whom he has chosen."³¹

The readers, as implied in v 10, were seeking to observe the revealed law of God, but if one fails at even a single point, then the law is broken. The readers were faithful with regard to the commandment against adultery (2:11; cf. Exod 20:14), but not with regard to murder. The readers do not commit murder in the common meaning of the term, but James no doubt understands the commandment against murder in the deeper sense which Jesus gave to it in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-22). The act of partiality, understood in light of the Sermon on the Mount, demonstrates how the readers had violated the law.

James' words that close this section (2:1-13) indicate again how his ethical concerns are based upon the words of Jesus. In all of one's actions, the final judgment must be kept in mind. James demands that the poor be treated honorably with mercy out of the fear of God's judgment (cf. Matt 5:4; 6:14-15; 12:1; 18:21-25; and 25:31-46). Since

³⁰ Davids, *James* 34.

³¹ B. Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday 1964) 29.

believers want to be shown mercy, they must show mercy. Believers have been shown mercy on the basis of the cross of Jesus, but this is not explicitly stated by James. Demonstration of partiality based on social position is a denial of mercy. So the believing community is reminded that they are to face a judgment tempered by mercy. "Since the advantage of a judgment tempered by mercy is offered us in Christ, the Christian must always so speak and act that by always showing mercy in this life, or trying to do so, he may have some color of hope with which to face that judgment."³² Therefore "mercy triumphs over judgment!" (2:13). The choice of the word mercy is significant, for in this context it does not merely refer to charitable concern of others, but has special reference to the care of the poor.³³ The mercy produced in the heart of the believers by the mercy of God is evidence of genuine faith and true piety.

Poverty and Wealth. While most of the emphasis in the passage is on concern for the poor, a word should be said about the rich. There are several hints about the perils of riches. It is the rich who oppress (2:6). They are especially condemned in 5:1-6 and are reminded that they have laid up treasures for days to come (5:3; cf. Matt 6:19-34). From these strong admonitions, one might understand that James regarded the rich and material possessions as evil in themselves. But his polemic is not against possessions *per se*, but against "those who have gained wealth by fraud and even at the expense of other people's lives (5:4-6)." ³⁴

The Control of the Tongue 3:1-12

Teachers. James has spoken of the control of the tongue (1:19, 26), but he gives a full discussion of the issue in 3:1-12. The first admonition is addressed to teachers (3:1). There were officers (5:14) in the young developing community, but apparently at this stage there was no ordination or training process required to teach in the assembly. It was relatively easy for those with ability and motivation to put themselves forward as teachers. James warns against too strong an influx into the teaching position (an office which the writer himself appears to hold) and points out that the failures of teachers will incur severe penalties in

³² Adamson, *Epistle of James* 120. Adamson includes a lengthy discussion on justice and mercy in Jewish literature, 116-20. Also cf. S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (London: Black, 1980) 116-18.

³³ Davids, *James* 37; cf. R. G. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966) 575-76.

³⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 930; also cf. D. K. Adie, "Christian View of Wealth" *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 1159-62 (hereinafter cited as EDT).

the judgment.³⁵ James recognizes the potential for social power and position and warns against the dangers inherent in the teaching ministry. The exhortation is that one should be reluctant to become a teacher.

The dangers are reflected in the strictness of the judgment (3:1) and the fact that "all stumble in many ways" (3:2). The teachers were not only instructors, but models for the community. If everyone will be judged for the words spoken (Matt 12:36) and Jewish teachers were severely judged (Matt 23:1-13), how much more strictly will Christian teachers be judged? As models for the community, they were responsible for leading or misleading the people of God in both word and deed.³⁶

The Difficulty of Controlling the Tongue. Little things can have far-reaching effects, and though the tongue is small, it has potential for usefulness and destruction. James illustrates this truth by use of: (1) a horse's bit (3:3); (2) a ship's rudder (3:4); and (3) fire (3:5-6). The first two illustrations portray the usefulness of a small item in controlling something many times its size; the third graphically demonstrates the potentially destructive power of something that at its beginning is very insignificant (Prov 16:27; 26:18-22). The tongue is a "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8; cf. Prov 18:21) and cannot be tamed by any human being, although it may be properly concluded that it can be tamed by God.³⁷

James points out the moral incongruity of blessing and cursing flowing from the same mouth (3:9-11). This is a demonstration of the uncontrollable nature of the tongue. On the one hand, it is used to "praise our Lord and Father" and simultaneously used to "curse men, who have been made in God's likeness" (3:9). The fact that men and women are created in God's likeness makes the cursing of people equivalent to cursing God. Such instability of cursing and blessing is a sign of the evil impulse of the tongue and ought not be tolerated. The Christian is called to root out all such tendencies and to arrive at singleness and sincerity of heart. James concludes this section with three appropriate analogies that describe the moral incongruity of the tongue (3:11-12). The section shows that a believer, and especially a teacher, must be consistent in the use of the tongue. One cannot claim to speak God's wisdom with pious language mixed with criticism and slander, even though it may be often well hidden. A person's control of his or her tongue is evidence of genuine faith and true piety.³⁸

³⁵ K. Wegenast, "Teach" *DNTT* 3 (1979) 768.

³⁶ V. Doerksen, *James* (EBC; Chicago: Moody, 1983) 77. ;

³⁷ Maston, *Biblical Ethics* 265. Cf. P. E. Adolph, "Tongue" *ZPEB* 5 (1975) 774-75.

³⁸ Cf. Hiebert, *Epistle of James* 43, for his concept of tests whereby readers; examine their own faith and piety.

Vices and Virtues 3:13-18

Virtues. This particular section offers certain qualities which belong to wisdom and are reflective of the life of Jesus. The virtues are characteristic of true piety; the vices are representative of those things that belong to the world and the devil. The virtues are purity, peace-ableness, gentleness, submission and mercy (3:17). Where these virtues are present without insincerity, James sees evidence of "wisdom that comes from heaven." These virtues are virtually parallel to the virtues listed by Paul as fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), although James does not mention the role of the Spirit.³⁹ These virtues are part and parcel of the life of true piety and are character qualities to be emulated.⁴⁰ They are "predominantly non-selfish and non-aggressive."⁴¹ Such virtues manifest greater concern for others than for oneself. James has no place for self-importance or self-aggrandizement, for he stresses the "humility that comes from wisdom" (3:13).⁴²

Vices. The positive virtues are contrasted by the negative vices of "bitter envy and selfish ambition" (3:14). James is critical of these vices and characterizes them as "earthly, unspiritual and of the devil" (3:15). There is an obvious difference between the heavenly virtues and the demonic vices. The vices suggest the presence of "disorder and every evil practice" (3:16).

Wisdom. These lists of virtues and vices are often found in other Jewish and Greek household lists and could be understood as common observations of life, even without a religious sense. But this suggested interpretation is untenable, for the heavenly wisdom presupposes religious faith. James, in line with the wisdom of the OT, assumes that "the fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10). He offers admonitions that are more than insightful advice. The application that must be made is that true piety, heavenly wisdom, affects every aspect of life. The result of this type of life produces a harvest of peace and righteousness. James himself is portrayed as a peacemaker in Acts 15 and 21, but his primary reference is not based upon personal attributes, but upon the teaching of Jesus who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt 5:9).

³⁹ Cf. L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. J. E. Alsup (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2.143-45; and E. Schweizer, "Traditional Ethical Patterns the Pauline and Post-Pauline Letters and Their Development Lists of Vices and Housetable" *Text and Interpretation*, ed. E. Best and R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979) 195-210.

⁴⁰ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 920-28.

⁴¹ Ibid. 928.

⁴² Mitton, *Epistle of James* 135, understands humility or meekness as that which true wisdom produces. Humility in Jas 1:21 means a readiness to receive the word.

Worldliness 4:1-12

Selfishness. This final section includes admonitions directed toward practical problems of disunity in the community. James warns his readers about "fights and quarrels" in their midst (4:1). Fighting and quarrels are not characteristic of true piety, but instead are evidence of worldliness. The source of the quarrels, the real battleground according to James, is an internal problem within the believers themselves (4:2). The struggle is between love for God and friendship with the world (4:4, 8). The one who is a friend of the world "becomes an enemy of God" (4:4). Those involved in continuous fighting, produced by selfishness and coveting (4:2) are the recipients of harsh words from James. He calls them "an adulterous people." The only love that a believer can (and should) have for the world is that which "stems from and is similar in kind to God's redemptive love for the world."⁴³ This redemptive love is merciful to those in need and practices heaven-sent virtues, but the love for the world condemned by James is a love for self and the things of the world. Such love is compromise representing unfaithfulness to God (4:4-5) and results in ungodly characteristics of slander and judging of others (4:11-12).⁴⁴

Right Priorities. The remedy for worldliness is a reestablishment of priorities. Instead of selfishness, there is submission to God. The kingdom ethic demands that God receives utmost priority. For those who humbly submit to God and his rule, God will give grace. James quotes Prov 3:34, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God provides gracious forgiveness for the past and enablement and blessing for the future. The prideful, the selfish are friends of the world but the humble who recognize personal insufficiencies and give absolute allegiance to God are God's friends and the recipients of his grace.

Conjoined with the admonition to submit to God is the exhortation to "resist the devil" (4:7). The comforting promise is added "he will flee from you." There are no rituals or detailed instructions on how to respond when believers face demonic agents. James simply says, "resist the devil and he will flee from you." It is difficult to understand fully how this resistance takes place, but one can count on the fact that the devil will have to back off and give ground.⁴⁵ The command to resist the devil occurs between two imperatives: "submit to God" (4:7)

⁴³ Maston, *Biblical Ethics* 269.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ R. Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985)

and "draw near to God" (4:8). It is only as the believer obeys these commands that he or she is able to be assured that Satan will flee.⁴⁶

Not only are believers to "submit to God" as servants, but they are to "draw near to God" as worshipers entering into communion with God. The Jewish readers recognized the need of preparation for genuine worship. Vv 8-9 symbolically picture this personal and inner preparation that must take place because God must be approached with a pure heart. The parallel imperatives are nicely summarized by D. Hiebert, "God demands undivided affection as well as undefiled conduct."⁴⁷

The discussion goes full circle and concludes with the thought that brings the reader back to the starting point. "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up." God promises to honor those who do not seek after the pleasures of the world, but who make the first priority of life wholehearted love, devotion and allegiance to God.

Summary

We have seen that James is an altogether practical letter. In the five brief chapters, there is a virtual gold-mine of material about everyday Christian living. The series of exhortations to the scattered Jewish Christians admonishes and instructs them onward to true piety and genuine faith. In this section of the paper, we have not addressed the entire spectrum of James' ethical thought, but we have restricted our discussion around five central themes. At this stage in our essay, we shall redirect our focus from the 1st-century teaching to its 20th-century significance. We shall amplify upon the ethical themes by briefly suggesting implications for important theological and ethical issues facing the contemporary church.

IV. Implications for the Contemporary Church

The Church and Biblical Inerrancy

It is obvious that James treats the words of Jesus and the OT scriptures as authoritative for the early church. He does not question their reliability and expects their dictates to be obeyed.⁴⁸ He also identifies himself as a "servant of God" (1:1) and assumes a stamp of authority beyond himself for his writings.

What we learn from James is that we must approach the scripture with reverence. But for James it is not enough merely to affirm a belief

⁴⁶ Doerksen, *James* 102; cf. C. F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Eerdmans, 1957) 177.

⁴⁷ Hiebert, *Epistle of James* 264.

⁴⁸ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 975.

in the truthfulness of Scripture, we must live under its authority. It is not enough to utter an orthodox confession. It is not enough to hear the word. We must obey it and put it into practice. As the word of God finds a home in our lives, it becomes the word of God implanted as our divine authority for all things that pertain to life and godliness.⁴⁹

The Church and Renewal

Certainly, there is no issue in Christianity today that is more needed than genuine renewal in the churches. There is a mass of literature available on the spiritual life that likewise brings mass confusion. What is needed is a healthy spirituality that produces God-sent renewal to the churches. Today's unhealthy divisions between "the theological and the practical" or the "spiritual and the secular" are directly addressed by the everyday practical nature of the spirituality of James. He is concerned not just with a high and lofty spirituality, but with a genuine piety that evidences mercy to the poor, widows and orphans in distress. He is concerned about issues of power, self-centeredness, and infighting and divisions among believers. Genuine renewal recognizes that believers will be characterized by heaven-sent virtues. These virtues are produced by a God-centered, kingdom-centered life. It also recognizes that such a life is in contrast to the earthly, unspiritual and demonic spirit of the world. The church today desperately need to understand the dynamics of spiritual renewal at the individual and corporate level.⁵⁰ James' admonitions speak to this important need.

The Church-Growth Movement

The church of Jesus Christ has grown enormously since the time that James wrote his epistle. From the initial small group of believers, the church according to contemporary missiologists now numbers over one billion people. Today, concern for church growth, which has always been important for God's people, has become a specialized field of study. The modern church-growth movement seeks to com-

⁴⁹ H. D. McDonald, "Authority of the Bible" *EDT* (1984) 139-40. Also cf. D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (2 vols.; San Francisco: Harper and R 1978-79) 2.239-41, 265-75.

⁵⁰ Cf. Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life*; R. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1980); H Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) and Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977). A very important aspect of church renewal is the place of prayer. The reader is encouraged to R. Wells, "The Theology of Prayer in James" in this issue of CTR.

bine theological convictions and sociological observations. This movement was begun by D. A. McGavran and his disciples and colleagues such as W. Arn, P. Wagner and A. Glasser. The movement can be summarized in seven principles.

- (1) An evaluation is made of what is happening in a church. Is a church stagnant or growing? Why?
- (2) The group to be evangelized must be targeted and understood.
- (3) The message of the gospel must be contextualized for the targeted people.
- (4) The congregation grows best if it is homogeneous, a place where people can feel at home.
- (5) A strategy of outreach must be developed.
- (6) Goals must be set.
- (7) The laity must be enlisted and mobilized for purposeful outreach. Gifts of evangelism should be discovered and exercised.⁵¹

It is beyond our limitations to evaluate seriously the church-growth movement. That has been done by several groups and people.⁵² Our purpose is limited to how the ethical admonitions of James might apply to the principles of the church-growth movement.

The fourth point listed above, which is based upon sociological observations and analysis, is at least questionable in light of James' statements on partiality in chap. 2. While James speaks directly to the treatment of rich and poor, the principle itself is general and its significance can be expanded. If Christians demonstrate partiality or favoritism toward those of different classes, cultures or races, they seem to fall short of the Lord's standard of impartiality. One of the primary reasons why partiality is wrong, in addition to violating God's standards, is that in practice partiality destroys the unity of the community of faith. The church-growth movement is obviously correct that, for example, some Hispanics will feel more comfortable in Hispanic, Spanish-speaking churches. This may be true in principle for other racial and cultural groups as well. But insofar as the principle becomes a barrier for unity or a reason to further partiality in our churches, it must be recognized as a violation of the direct teachings of the epistle of James.

⁵¹ D. A. McGavran, "Church Growth Movement" *EDT* (1984) 241-43; cf. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

⁵² Cf. H. Conn, ed., *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977). Note especially the articles by J. I. Packer, R. Greenway and R. Recker.

The Church and Social Responsibility

A very important avenue of the church's ministry is its responsibility to show acts of mercy toward believers and non-believers.⁵³ The model of the life of Jesus demonstrates care for the problems of the poor, the suffering and the downcast. The church, if it is to follow in the steps of Jesus must be engaged in the same form of ministry. James' epistle heartily stresses this holistic, practical Christianity.⁵⁴

American Evangelicalism has a faithful history of social involvement prior to its struggles in the "Fundamentalist-Modernist" controversies in the early decades of this century.⁵⁵ During this time, there was a division between the spiritual gospel proclaimed by the Fundamentalists and the social gospel advocated by the Modernists. Sadly the churches in America divided the gospel with its spiritual dimensions and social ramifications. The Fundamentalists in an attempt to safeguard the purity of the gospel retreated from social involvement.⁵⁶ The social aspects of the gospel were taken over by the Modernists, exemplified in the ministry of W. Rauschenbusch.⁵⁷ This unhealthy division had all but eliminated a concern for the social ramifications of the gospel among evangelicals for fear of compromising the gospel.

In 1947, C. F. H. Henry attacked the social apathy of Fundamentalists from within the movement in his groundbreaking publication, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, and in so doing, set in motion the effort to rediscover an evangelical theology for society. Since Henry's appeal in 1947, the Evangelical world has once again begun to think and act rightly about the needs of men and women in this world as well as in the life to come." The church is to

⁵³ Cf. S. Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 19-26.

⁵⁴ M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982-85) 3.1057-59. R. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 156, notes the diaconal responsibility for this ministry in the church.

⁵⁵ This is well documented in J. D. Woodbridge, M. A. Noll and N. O. Hatch, *The Gospel in America* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 225-47. Yet even in the 18th century, Cotton Mather discussed the relation of piety to poverty and prosperity. He commented that piety had begotten prosperity and the daughter had devoured the mother in the *Magnalia* (London, 1702) 1.63.

⁵⁶ E.g., J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

⁵⁷ E.g., W. Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Ha; and Row, reprint 1964; originally published in 1907).

⁵⁸ R. D. Linder, "The Resurgence of Evangelical Social Concern (1925-75)" *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing*, ed. D. F. Wells and J. D. Woodbridge (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 189-210. A sample of

show concern and take action wherever it sees need, hurt or wrong. Such was the message of the 1974 Lausanne Covenant to the evangelical world.⁵⁹ More important than this significant covenant from the corporate evangelical world is the message of James written to scattered Jewish Christians over 1900 years ago. The message of James speaks with authority to our continued responsibility to understand, proclaim and apply the entire gospel message, for this is true piety.

The Church and Liberation Theology

One of the most recent movements' on the theological scene is liberation theology. Liberation theologians have developed a theology of action that is centered around the needs of the poor and the oppressed. These theologians believe that orthodox theology has too long neglected the problems of the oppressed and in doing so has tended to manipulate God in favor of the capitalistic social structure. They believe that orthodox theology has not just neglected the oppressed, but has actually influenced the oppression of the poor and downtrodden. This movement has responded with a complete theological system that is a theology in the world. Some of the primary points of liberation theology can be articulated as follows. God is not a timeless, immutable person existing outside of this world, but instead is a crucified God who submerges himself in a world of misery. God is thus on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Salvation is liberation from oppression and injustice. Sin is defined as inhumanity toward other humans. In the end, liberation theology equates loving one's neighbor with loving God. It equates God's revelation with the voice

important works devoted to this subject in recent years includes: J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); J. M. Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Glendale: Regal, 1976); R. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977); H. Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); A. Compolo, *A Reasonable Faith* (Waco: Word, 1983) and J. R. W. Stott, *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1985). Most evangelicals have profited from these challenges and as a result our ministry is more complete and our message more balanced. The leadership of Perkins, Conn and Stott in this matter has been most beneficial. Yet, there are some like Sider and Compolo who may have tipped the scales too far, even echoing aspects of liberation theology in their message.

⁵⁹ C. R. Padilla, ed., *The New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976); cf. J. R. W. Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975). The International Council of Biblical Inerrancy is hosting Summit III in December, 1986 in Chicago. In this meeting the implications of biblical inerrancy will be discussed. One of the issues to be discussed is the relation of a belief in inerrancy and its ramifications for social involvement. Two important papers on this matter are J. Perkins, "Wealth and Poverty" and R. Nash, "Economics."

of the oppressed. The gospel is the announcing of God's participation in the human struggle for justice.⁶⁰

Liberation theology is built upon J. Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1965). This theological foundation is conflated with Marxist economics and some biblical themes of liberation such as the Exodus event and the message of Jesus in Luke 4:19 that he has come "to set captives free" (understood in physical and not spiritual terms). The result is a more Marxist than biblical movement which advocates that a theology of the church in the world should be complemented by a theology of the world in the church.⁶¹

The obvious question concerns the reference in Jas 2:5 which indicates that "God has chosen the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him." We should recognize that our understanding of James certainly affirms God's concern for the poor. What then can we say about James' admonition at this point? Is liberation theology a biblical movement? Is James a forerunner of the liberation theology movement?

First, we acknowledge the strength of liberation theology is its compassion for the poor and downtrodden and that believers must not remain unconcerned about the difficult situation of the oppressed. We concur that inhumanitarian acts of prejudice and partiality are to be seen as sin and in need of Christian resistance. We also agree that Jesus is the model for practical and social acts of mercy to the poor.

Yet, we differ at several important points with liberation theology as well. We do not think that James declares the rich to be evil oppressive because they are rich. James declares that the rich are evil when they oppress the poor and/or gain their riches by fraud. We agree that the poor have a special place in God's redemptive plan, but this is much different from declaring that the poor are the voice of God. We disagree that the poor are the voice of God or the embodiment of God in the world. The result of this approach to revelation would be opposed to James' word concerning the poor as God's elect (2:5) and would threaten to offer hope to the poor that could be provided apart from Jesus Christ.⁶² The ethic of James is centered

⁶⁰ The standard work on this subject is G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973). For brief summaries of this movement, cf. D. D. Webster, "Liberation Theology" *EDT* 635-38; and A. Kee, "Liberation Theology" *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 328-30. We have only addressed the major concepts of this subject as they are applied to the poor, especially in third world countries. There are several other approaches to the movement that focus on other oppressed groups such as J. Cone's, "Black Liberation Theology" and L. Russell's "Feminist Liberation Theology."

⁶¹ Cf. Gutierrez, *ibid.*

⁶² Webster, "Liberation Theology" 637.

around the life and words of Jesus and his kingdom rule. It is in Jesus that God has ultimately revealed himself. Thus he does not reveal himself through the poor, but to the poor through Jesus Christ. Thus, we find that our understanding of James differs at crucial points from liberation theology. This is certainly not an attempt at a complete evaluation of liberation theology,⁶³ but it is an attempt to assess the movement at applicable points as it speaks to similar concerns of James' ethical admonitions. James is opposed to partiality and mistreatment of the poor, but this is not the same as Marxist economics and the unbalanced biblical themes of liberation theology.

V. Conclusion

In this essay, we have attempted to survey the ethical admonitions in the epistle of James. We discovered that James is an intensely practical book concerned with the everyday actions of believers at both the individual and corporate aspects of the Christian life. James pictures true piety as the direct application of the implanted word in the life of the believer. The result vertically is the submission to and worship of God. The result horizontally is concern for the poor, widows and orphans in distress. The result relationally is living peaceably with others in the church. The result inwardly is the humility, purity and gentleness of character that comes from heavenly wisdom. We have seen how these ethical admonitions mirror the aT prophets and proverbs, but ultimately it was seen that James' pictures of piety are based upon and modeled by the words and life of Jesus.

We observed how the true piety of James speaks to five important issues in the life of the contemporary Christian community. We learned that even though James is addressed to a unique situation in the life of the early church over 1900 years ago, it still speaks to us and admonishes us by exhorting us to live out the gospel in all of its implications. This means living responsibly in the church as citizens of the kingdom in submission to God and evidencing mercy, righteousness and peace to other men and women created in the likeness and image of God.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the life of true piety as pictured by James is much easier for me, the author, to write about and for you, the reader, to read about than it is for us to do. But James

⁶³ Three excellent evaluations of liberation theology are J. A. Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980); R. Nash, ed., *Liberation* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1984). The reader will find the articles by H. O. J. Brown, C. F. H. Henry and C. Pinnock to be very useful, and Emilio A. Nunez C., *Liberation Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1985).

will not be satisfied with hearing. It must be accompanied by doing.
May God help us to humble ourselves before him so that we
receive enabling grace to live with undivided affection for God
undefiled conduct before others.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College
4010 Gaston Ave.
Dallas, TX 75246
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu