

## Performing the Letter of James

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I have been encouraging you in these lectures to consider performing not just narrative portions of the *Bible* but also letters. Today I would like to focus on the *Letter of James*. The *Letter of James* is very different from the first two letters I have shared with you. Unlike *James*, the first two letters, *Philemon* and *Galatians*, have specific audiences and a set of problems and stories leading up to each letter. By contrast, *James* is general in nature. Nevertheless, it still lends itself to performance. In fact, there are many letters in the New Testament that would make interesting and powerful performances. I want to commend some of them to you in the hopes that you are thinking of performing a letter as an individual or as a group. Before we turn to *James*, then, here are some reflections on other *New Testament* letters that you may want to consider performing.

**New Testament Letters for Performance.** If you want to perform a letter, I would recommend first of all the letters that we are confident were written by Paul himself. Consider the two I have done here, *Philemon* and *Galatians*. Perhaps even better than *Galatians* is *Philippians*; it is about the same length as *Galatians* (between twenty-five to thirty minutes). I think you would find *Philippians* to be profoundly personal and meaningful and uplifting. Paul was in prison, and he nevertheless wrote a letter of joy and encouragement in friendship with the church of Philippi. Another letter that works well for story and performance is *1 Thessalonians*, which has a wonderful account of the way in which faith, hope, and love are a part of a Christian community. And it charts the struggle Paul had in founding this church, and how Paul and the church remained faithful to each other. You can interpret both of these letters as stories according to the process for reading letters that I have been recommending.

Two other letters of Paul, letters that are demanding for performance in terms of length and complexity, are *1 Corinthians* and *2 Corinthians*. We think *2 Corinthians* is comprised of two different letters that were put together into one letter at some point. Probably chapters 10-13 of *2 Corinthians* are one letter that was written first, and chapters 1-9 are another letter that was written after that. You could perform these letters separately. It also works well to select passages from these letters to learn and perform—without having to do the whole letter. If the letters are too long to perform as a whole, consider the advice on spiritual gifts in *1 Corinthians* 12 or the hymn to love in *1 Corinthians* 13 or the reflections on resurrection in *1 Corinthians* 15. Or consider the section on ministry in *2 Corinthians* 3-4 or some of the powerful autobiographical portions in *2 Corinthians* 10-13.

I think Paul's *Letter to the Romans* would be difficult to perform. *Romans* is a lengthy argument that has limited personal relationships. It is a powerful and very important letter to do, and it has a crucial message for our day. Perhaps *Romans* could be done as a group or as an epic telling at a NOBS festival. It is very likely that Paul commissioned a woman, Phoebe, to learn this letter and to perform it before the assembly in Rome. So when Janet, a missionary to Slovakia, performed *Romans* (with the knowledge that perhaps a woman in the first century performed it), it was profoundly moving to women in Slovakia, who had not themselves had

many opportunities to be storytellers. Her story is important to hear, because as a woman she empowered other women by her performance. We need many different voices to tell biblical stories and letters. I am very limited in my telling of the *Bible* stories because I am a white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, heterosexual, part of the dominant culture. My point is that I cannot easily represent the suppressed peoples who told these stories in the ancient world, such as women who were dominated or peasants who were oppressed. It seems to me we need many voices—young and old, women and men, and people from a diversity of cultures and races. We tell the stories differently, we hear them differently; and we need that, very much.

When we consider letters that have been attributed to Paul, such as *Colossians* or *Ephesians* or *Hebrews*, they are much more general. They do not seem to address specific problems of a concrete congregation. I do not believe Paul wrote these letters, and most of the colleagues I work with do not believe these letters were written by Paul. We tend to consider that later disciples of Paul wrote these letters in his name after his death as a means of carrying on his legacy. There are many profound and beautiful passages in *Colossians* and *Ephesians*, even though they also contain the household codes that commend the subordination of women and slaves. Nor do scholars generally think that Paul wrote the letters to Timothy and Titus. These “pastoral” epistles lend themselves to a personal performance; however, they are also difficult letters because they emphasize, for example, that women are saved by bearing children. Nevertheless, you may want to perform them and engage your audience in conversation in response to hearing them. I have a student who has been memorizing *Hebrews* for performance, and I am very eager to hear it.

There are also the Catholic Epistles, general letters such as *James* (see below), *1 Peter*, and *1 John*. I encourage you to consider performing these as well. They are called “catholic” letters because they were written to be circulated among many assemblies across a large region. We have the same questions about the authorship of these letters as we do with some of the letters attributed to Paul. *1 Peter* is not that difficult to learn, but it has some of the same problems as the letters attributed to Paul, such as the household codes. I have performed *1 Peter* numerous times, and I have discovered that it is much more subversive in relation to the civic codes than we have previously thought. *1 Peter* manifests a rich understanding of the holiness of the Christian community, and it is a testimony to the struggle of early Christians to provide a safe haven of family-like support in the face of the alienation and persecution that Christians faced in the first century.

People need to hear these letters, not just read them in the *Bible*. As I pointed out in the first lecture, letters were composed and dictated in order to be performed. A letter would have been performed numerous times in its entirety in the early church. Part of our commission as storytellers is to bear the full tradition of the *Bible* in oral presentation—not only the narrative portions but also the letters. Please consider learning them as a whole or one part of them for performance for our sisters and brothers. But also, I commend them to you because memorizing and performing is the best way to understand them! I memorized and performed the *Book of Revelation* mainly in order to try to figure out what it meant to early Christians. I still do not know the full dynamics of its many mysteries, but I have a grasp of *Revelation* that I could not have gotten in any other way. Again, you can learn and perform *Revelation* as a whole or in part, such as the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3 or the vision of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21.

***The Letter of James: Background.*** This brings us to the letter we are focusing on today, the *Letter of James*. The *Letter of James* seems buried near the end of the New Testament. You may not have read James or studied it. You may not know much about it. Lutherans have generally tended to avoid this letter. We Lutherans embrace Paul’s affirmation of justification by faith alone and not by works of the Law, whereas the *Letter of James* affirms that “faith without works is dead.” It is for this reason that Martin Luther referred to the *Letter of James* as the “epistle of straw.” All the more reason why Lutherans should know this letter! However, there are many places where *James* is deeply appreciated. About ten years ago, I learned about a survey that had been done in the African country of Nigeria. The survey was seeking to find out the texts in the *Bible* on which most sermons were preached in Nigeria. The text in the Bible upon which most sermons were preached turned out to be the *Letter of James*! Furthermore, African-Americans from all denominations, including the Lutheran church, consider *James* to be a very important text because it condemns discrimination as incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ.

What do we know about the *Letter of James*? *James* was probably written in the late first century, maybe in the nineties. It was probably not written by James, the brother of Jesus, even though the letter claims to be from someone named James. In the ancient world, it was very common to write in the name of a well-known figure. It was considered an honor that you would write a letter in someone’s name. Even if James did not write it, nevertheless the influence of James the brother of Jesus may have been part of the tradition behind this letter. Or James may actually have written it. We are not sure.

The letter was addressed “to the twelve tribes of the dispersion,” that is, to Judean Christian communities scattered outside Palestine across the northern Mediterranean world. It is not clear if there were some gentile Christians among the audiences, but that is probably likely. The letter seems to be addressed predominantly to poor peasants rather than wealthy elites. It also implies that these peasants may have been oppressed and exploited by the rich. In any case, the letter urges the communities to give preference to the poor and marginalized and to speak against exploitation by the wealthy. Also among the audiences of *James*, there may have been persecution of these peasants as Christians. The letter encourages the communities to endure with patience until the Lord comes. In the meantime, the recipients are to maintain their devotion to God, to maintain their ethical commitment to care for each other and the poor, and to rescue anyone who wandered from the truth.

***The Rhetoric: The Letter of James as oral wisdom.*** *James* begins as a letter. Nevertheless, while the first line opens as a letter from “James to the twelve tribes of the dispersion,” this is the last feature you will see in the whole writing that resembles anything like a letter. The rest of it looks like a series of ethical exhortations. In places, some sections of James look like midrash commentary on passages from the *Old Testament*. James may be a collection of one or more homilies that were given in early Christian synagogues at one time or another. Predominantly, *James* is comprised of wisdom traditions—pieces of oral wisdom from Judaism and the teachings of Jesus—that at first blush appear simply to be strung together. There was a time when scholars thought *James* was just a scattered collection of such traditions. However, most scholars now recognize its coherence. When you study *James*, you can see the patterns that recur throughout the letter, oral patterns of story and speech that give the *Letter of James* its coherence.

Like other writings in the oral culture of the New Testament, *James* was either composed orally first and then transcribed or it was written in order to be performed. In either case, *James* manifests features of oral performance. One of the typical things about oral compositions is that

they do not manifest a progressive linear development; rather, there is a pattern of “repetition with variation.” This letter has a spiral organization. Themes are woven throughout. So you pick up on a theme, you leave it, you come back to it, you leave it, you come back to it. If you missed the theme the first or second time it was dealt with, maybe you will get it the third time. In any case, with each repetition, the theme is reinforced and amplified.

*James* has all kinds of such oral patterning in it, along with techniques of oral storytelling or speaking. *James* has many features that are typical of oral literature—writings that are meant to be performed orally and have an impact on the aural experience of the audiences. A private paper on “The Drama of James” by Ernest Wendland includes the following among the oral features of *James*: formulaic ways of addressing recipients; sound play such as rhythm, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration; proverbial sayings and maxims; rhetorical questions and leading questions; evocative images from life experiences; forceful language such as imperatives, exaggeration, and irony; strong contrasts; synonymous and antithetical parallelism; unusual word order that creates special effects; scenarios with direct discourse; and allusions to the teachings of Jesus and to the (Judean) scriptures. As oral literature that is comprised of “wisdom,” many of the motifs and insights are comprised of images and lessons from nature and everyday life—waves of the sea, fading flowers, mirrors, horses, ships, species of animals, springs, fig trees, rain and harvest, among many others. All these features are oriented toward the oral impact on hearers and comprise a significant part of the rhetoric of *James*.

***Settings, plot, and characters.*** There is no single community with one specific circumstance that the *Letter of James* addresses; so the analysis of settings, plot, and characters cannot be done in the same way as we have done with *Philemon* and *Galatians*. What we have in *James* are many brief “scenarios” that provide examples and analogies for the development of themes. So the way to analyze *James* as a story is to choose a theme and notice recurring references that theme throughout the letter. As an illustration, take the theme of wealth and poverty. Examples and analogies of this theme may include: the poor are elevated and the rich are brought low; the rich will wither like flowers in the heat of the day; the assembly defers to the rich and discriminates against the poor; the community wishes a destitute person well but fails to provide for their needs; true religion is caring for orphans and widows; the rich should bewail the miseries coming upon them; the rich withhold the wages of their workers; and the assembly should pray for those suffering misfortune. From these plot scenarios, we can note settings that illuminate the images and analyze recurring types of characters—such as rich and poor, the powerful and the lowly, oppressors and oppressed, and so on.

We could choose other themes and do similar analyses. In addition to rich and poor, themes include temptation, wisdom, humility, faith expressed by works, integrity, control of the tongue, grace, purity, prayer, and judgment, among others. As we have illustrated above, the recurring examples and analogies of these themes offer scenarios that provide settings, plots, and characters for analysis. Each recurring instance of a theme adds depth and breadth to the understanding of that theme in *James*. And the more one interprets a theme, the more one sees how the themes interrelate with and illuminate each other. *James* is a rich tapestry of insights about life. It is like a fugue with various motifs running through the composition, fading and emerging as the music progresses.

***The standards of judgment: The two ways.*** As with the *Letter to the Galatians*, it is possible to discern the standards of judgment in the *Letter of James*. The purpose of *James* was to *exhort hearers to reject earthly wisdom and to embrace the wisdom from above so that the community would endure in faithfulness until the imminent end*. Looking therefore at the standards of judgment in this writing is very helpful for understanding it. You can listen for these contrasts as you hear the letter performed. In this regard, the author presents a rhetoric of contrast, a rhetoric that urges hearers to choose the right way and to reject the opposite evil way. There is a rhetoric of contrast in *Galatians* also, but the content is quite different. In *James*, hearers can choose to be “friends of God” who look to God for every good and perfect gift or “friends of the world” who destroy, oppress, exploit, and neglect the poor in order to meet their desires for worldly wealth. Here is a brief list of contrasts that help to focus the exhortations of this letter.

<i>Friends of the World</i>	<i>Friends of the God</i>
Earthly wisdom	Wisdom from above
Exploit and oppress the poor	Care for orphans and widows
Partial to the rich and powerful	Special inclusion of the lowly
Hypocrisy	Integrity
Arrogance	Humility (meekness)
Succumbing to desire	Enduring temptation
Unbridled tongue	Bridled tongue
Showing partiality	Not discriminating
Stained by the world	Pure
In conflict/ battles	Yielding/ compliant
Bitter jealousy	Mercy
Selfish ambition	Compassion
Judging, speaking evil	Not judging or speaking evil
Giving birth to death	Saving/healing
Unstable people and communities	Stable people and communities
Final judgment by God	Kingdom/crown promised

The author speaks against embracing conventional earthly wisdom, the “wisdom of the world.” This so-called wisdom is what happens when people are looking out for themselves and not concerned with others, especially of the wealthy who exploit and oppress the poor and the marginalized. This “wisdom” includes arrogance, succumbing to desire, having an unbridled tongue, showing partiality or discrimination, being stained by the world, conflicts, battles, bitter jealousies, selfish ambition, judging people, and slander. Those who do such things have become “friends of the world.” Such behaviors bring “death” to individuals and destroy community with conflict and instability. The ultimate result is judgment by God who favors the poor and lowly and who opposes the arrogant.

By contrast, *James* commends the wisdom of God, the “wisdom from above.” Those who embrace this wisdom become friends of God. The wisdom from above is really what this letter is about. You get this wisdom, this capacity for peace, this righteousness of God, from grace that comes from above. This wisdom involves humility and meekness, enduring temptation successfully, bridling the tongue, not discriminating against the lowly, purity, generosity to the poor, mercy, compassion, and not judging or speaking evil of others. These behaviors save and heal individuals and generate stable communities of people who care for each other and who do

not waver or wander. The ultimate result is that the lowly who live out God's wisdom will inherit the kingdom and the crown that God has promised to those who love God.

**Reflections on the Two Ways.** I want to offer two insights about the contrast between these two ways. The first insight is that the wisdom of the world is rooted in the idea that the things of this world are limited and in short supply. Because there is only so much land and wealth and honor to go around, if one person gains then others will lose. Hence, everyone grasps after security for themselves and seeks to accumulate what they can by any means. This is the earthly wisdom by which people look to get as much as they can for themselves and do not care for orphans and widows and the destitute and the people of low status and the peasant workers and the sick. By contrast, those who look to God will find unlimited wisdom from above, unlimited grace that gives people the security that enables them to care for the poor, welcome the marginalized, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, pray for the sick, forgive one another's sins, and even bless those who do them wrong. By looking out for each other, the whole community thrives in dependence on God.

This insight is so relevant to our own society. As long as we get our meaning and fulfillment from material possessions and we think that more and more wealth will bring security and happiness, we will be tight-fisted, neglecting the poor and ignoring those who are struggling. But if we get our meaning in life from the wisdom that comes from God, we will be freed to be generous to the poor and welcoming to the lowly, so that all may benefit from the goodness of life. You will see that the *Letter of James* offers a preferential option for the poor. It also includes a condemnation of the rich—because of their arrogance and because of the wealth that they hoard at the expense of the poor. “God opposes the arrogant, but gives grace to the lowly.”

The second insight is this. No one is standing still. That is, people are either moving toward greater evil or they are moving toward greater good. So part of this letter is where you as hearers find yourselves in *James*' framework of morality. Friends of the world show progressive movement, in terms of *James*' analogy, as a woman in pregnancy—from conception (desire) to pregnancy (sin) to full maturity and birth (brings death). By contrast, the friends of God show progressive growth toward good, from resisting temptation to greater endurance to wholeness. It is God who gives birth to God's new creatures; and God's good gifts of grace lead to a mature faith. Mature faith is the fulfillment of what people were created for. If you had a fruit tree that never produced any fruit, you would say “What's the point?” Likewise, if you consider human beings who do not do good works, you might also say, “What's the point? *James* presents the idea that human beings were created for good works for those in need; and good works is what the grace of God leads people to produce. Wisdom from above creates a pure and peaceable community, people who are sustained by grace from above and who express their faith in speech and action—particularly in terms of care for orphans and widows.

**The Transformation.** How are people transformed from one type of wisdom to the other? How do people escape the syndrome of living by the wisdom of the world so as to be able to embrace the wisdom from above? It is God who gives birth to God's new creatures by a “word of truth” designed to lead people to look to God for life. Perhaps the *Letter of James* itself represents the word of truth that can lead people to look to God—to seek God's unlimited gifts from above and to resist destructive worldly desires, to turn from Satan and to draw near to God. The “gospel” of *James* is the wisdom of truth: When people follow what he calls the “perfect law of freedom”—namely, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”—then they will be able to be in community

with others in a holistic, healthy, and life-giving way. A parish based on *James* would express the values that all flourishing was cooperative, that the fruits of righteousness are expressed in mutual prayer, healing, forgiveness, praise, and rescuing from wandering.

Finally, I want to share a modern illustration about how a story might effect such a transformation. Here I want to emphasize the importance of human integrity in the *Letter of James*, because *James* gives numerous examples of integrity throughout the letter. He says that if we trust in God, then we will look to God for wisdom in the face of temptation. If we have the faith of Jesus Christ, then we will not discriminate against the poor. If we follow the Law, then we will love our neighbors as ourselves. If we care about our brothers and sisters, then we will clothe the naked and feed the hungry. If we have true religion, then we will care for orphans and widows. If we teach the faith, then we will control our tongues. If we bless God, then we will not curse those made in God's image. If we claim to be friends of God, then we will not be friends of the world. If our words are to mean anything, then we will not take oaths but always mean what we say. All these are examples of integrity that *James* urges upon its hearers.

The modern illustration is a story about Mahatma Gandhi that has the power to lead us by a word of truth to embrace the kind of integrity about which James writes. Before he became active in India, Gandhi lived in South Africa in a small Indian conclave, and he was a barrister, a lawyer, who had studied in England and was now living in this small community of Indians there. Because he was educated, people came to him as a village authority figure who could help to resolve problems that would arise in the community. Now there was a woman in the community who had a teenage son. Her husband died, and she lost the authority that was in the home in that culture. The son would not listen to her, and the problem was that he would not eat, at a growing age, any healthy food. He would eat nothing but sugar, sodas, candies, anything he could get his hands on with sugar, and she was so worried about him. And this went on for a long time, and she knew this could not be good, not only for his growth, but for his health and his life. So she went to Gandhi and told him the problem and said, "Will you please talk to my son and tell him to stop eating sugar. I know he will listen to you." Well, Gandhi said to her, "Would you come back in a week; then I'll speak to him." So the woman, already desperate, went off. With the problem no better, she came back in a week and, with great relief, she said to Gandhi, "Please, I've waited a week. Now will you talk to my son?" And Gandhi said, "I'm sorry, but could you come back in another week?" Well, the woman was even more desperate, but what could she do. So she went off. The problem continued. She came back the second week, and she said to Gandhi, "Please, will you talk to my son now?" And Gandhi said "Yes, I will." And he took him aside and he talked to him about the problem, and he resolved the problem with the woman's son. And afterwards, the mother, quite puzzled, came to Gandhi and said, "Why did you do this? When I first came to you, you asked me to come back in a week. And then when I came back, you asked me to come back in another week! Why did you do that?" And Gandhi said "Because I had not realized how difficult it would be for me to give up sugar!"

What a vision of integrity! The idea that I would never expect something from somebody else that I was not willing to do myself. The idea that I would not claim something to be good without doing it myself. That even in relation to my children and my students, I would not expect things of them that I would not do myself. How easy, especially as preachers or teachers or as Christians, it is for us to do that—to say what others should do and not do it ourselves. This story has the power to reveal to me my own hypocrisy. It also reveals to me a vision of integrity. And it empowers me to embrace such a vision of integrity for my own life. It is that kind of integrity, of word and action, of hearing the gospel and acting on it, of having faith and expressing it in

works, that the *Letter of James* seeks to engender. It is by “words of truth” in the *Letter of James* that we are empowered to embrace the integrity of the wisdom from above and to lead a life that will engender a community of people who live in wholeness and health.

With *James*, all of our integrity is possible due to grace from above, from God. Every good gift of wisdom and wholeness comes from above. Everything that produces our maturity comes from above. There is a little image at the end of the *Letter of James* that captures it all: “Heaven gave a shower, and the earth yielded its harvest.” That analogy is a metaphorical statement about God’s grace showering from heaven and our response in producing fruits. In the *Letter of James*, that is how it all happens: wisdom comes down from above, and humans produce a harvest of righteousness.

Now I invite you to listen to the *Letter of James*. What follows is my English translation of this letter from the Greek text. Assuming that you are reading this and not able to hear a performance, read the letter with my introduction in mind. And read it aloud. Or have someone read it to you. It takes about twenty-five to thirty minutes to do it. Experience it as a whole at one sitting. Notice that I have removed the chapter and verse designations so that it is not broken up into small pieces but comes to you whole cloth. That will make it easier to experience the entire letter at one time. Then go back and savor the insights there, turn the nuggets of wisdom over and over as you reflect on its meaning for your life. And seek transformation from its grace.

### **The Letter of James**

James a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes of the dispersion. Rejoice!

Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face various temptations, because you know that the successful testing of your faith works endurance, and let endurance come to a mature work so that you may be mature and whole, lacking in nothing.

But if any of you does lack wisdom, let them ask from God, who gives to all unreservedly, not grudgingly, and it will be given to them. But let them ask in faith, doubting nothing, for those who doubt are like a wave of the sea, wind-driven and tossed. Let such people not think they will receive anything from the Lord—double-minded people, unstable in every way.

Let the lowly brothers and sisters exult in being raised up, and let the rich exult in being brought low, because like a flower of the field, they will disappear. For the sun rises with its heat and dries up the field, and its flower wilts, and the beauty of its appearance perishes. So also the rich in their busy ways will wither away.

Blessed are those who endure temptation, because having been successfully tested they will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Let no one, when tempted, say, “I am being tempted by God.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, and God himself tempts no one. Rather, people are tempted by their own desire, being lured and enticed by it. Then desire, when conceived, becomes pregnant with sin, and sin, when brought to full maturity, gives birth to death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters, every generous act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is not one variation or shadow due to change. By his own purpose, he gave birth to us by a word of truth, so that we are a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters, let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for one's anger does not work God's righteousness. Therefore, putting

aside all filth and the growth of evil, with meekness welcome the implanted word that is able to save you.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Because if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like people who look at their natural appearance in a mirror. For they looked at themselves and went away and immediately forgot what they were like. But those who peer into the mature law of freedom, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers of works, these will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is empty. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this—to look after orphans and widows in their distress, to keep oneself unstained by the world.

My brothers and sisters, when you show partiality, do you really have the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if there enters into your assembly a person with gold rings and shiny clothes, and if there enters also a poor person in tattered clothes, and if you take notice of the one wearing the shiny clothes and say, “You sit here, please,” and to the one who is poor you say, “You stand over there” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you work sin, being convicted by the Law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become liable for all of it. The one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the Law. So speak and so act as people who are about to be judged by the law of freedom. For judgment will be without mercy for those who show no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

What is the benefit, my brothers and sisters, if someone says they have faith, but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the benefit? So, faith, if it does not have works, is dead in itself.

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You have faith that “God is one.” You do well! Even the demons have such faith, and they shudder! Do you want to know, you useless person, that faith apart from works is worthless?

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and by the works faith was brought to completion. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham put faith in God, and it was reckoned to him as justification,” and he was called “friend of God.” So you see that by works a person is justified and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without a spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment. For in many things we all make mistakes. If someone makes no mistakes in speaking, that is a mature person able to bridle also the whole body. If we put bridles

into the mouths of horses so that they will obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Consider also ships, though being so large and driven by strong winds, are nevertheless guided by such a small rudder wherever the touch of the pilot directs.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts great things. What a small fire ignites such a huge forest! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is a world of iniquity set among our members. It stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be subdued and has been subdued by the human species, but the human tongue no one can subdue—a restless evil, full of death-bearing poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those made in the likeness of God. From the same opening come blessing and cursing. It is not necessary, my brothers and sisters, for these things to be like this.

Does a spring from the same opening pour forth fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can salt water yield fresh water.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show their works by their good conduct in gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not wisdom come down from above, but something earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where there is jealousy and ambition, there also is instability and every foul matter. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, yielding, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, unhypocritical. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace with those who make peace.

Whence come wars and whence come battles among you? Are they not from this, from your cravings that are at conflict among their members? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You are jealous and cannot obtain, so you battle and make war. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly in order to spend on your cravings.

Adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend with the world is confirmed an enemy with God. Or do you suppose that the scripture speaks in vain when it says that the spirit of God made to dwell in us desires with jealousy? Yet he gives more grace! Therefore, it says, “God opposes the arrogant, but to the lowly gives grace.”

Therefore, submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to sadness. Lower yourselves before the Lord, and the Lord will raise you up.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. The one who speaks evil against a brother or judges a sister, speaks evil against Law and judges Law. But if you judge Law, you are not a doer of Law but the judge. There is one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. But who then are you who judges the neighbor?

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town, and we will spend a year there, and we will do business, and we will make money.” Yet you do not know what tomorrow will be. What is your life? For you are a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills it, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl over the miseries coming to you. Your wealth has rotted, and your clothes have become moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their

poison will be as testimony against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days.

Look, the wages of the workers who mowed your fields, which were held back by you, cry out, and the shouts of the harvesters have reached into the ears of the Lord of armies. You luxuriated on the earth and took pleasure. You fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You condemned, you murdered innocent ones. They do not resist you.

Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. Look, the farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the judge is standing at the gates! Take as an example, brothers and sisters, of suffering and patience the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold we call blessed those who have endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job. You saw the outcome that the Lord had for him, that the Lord was merciful and compassionate.

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath. But let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

Are any among you suffering misfortune? Let them pray. Are any cheerful? Let them sing songs of praise. Are any among you ill? Let them call for the elders of the assembly, and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise them up. And if any have committed sins, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. Powerful and effective is the petition of a righteous person.

Elijah was human like us, and he prayed mightily that it might not rain. And it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And again he prayed. And the heaven gave a shower, and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and some people restore that person, know that those who restore a sinner from wandering will save themselves from death and will cover a host of sins.

### **Further Reading.**

Patrick Hartin. *James*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003. (Sacra Pagina Commentaries).

Patrick Hartin. *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999.

Luke Johnson. *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. (Anchor Bible Commentary).

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Elsa Tamez. *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.