

PREPARATION FOR PREACHING JAMES AS CHRISTIAN WISDOM

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Introduction

Jesus himself never wrote a book or letter of the New Testament, but the letter from James was likely to have come from one of Jesus' half-brothers—James.¹ This alone should make this letter of special interest to the Christian. This letter provides us with a small window into how a brother of Jesus came to understand the significance of the life and especially the teaching of his older half-brother for the Christian church. Beyond such issues of historical interest, points out Karen Jobes,

[T]he letter from James indicates the wrestling that occurred as the apostles came to understand the relationship of the new covenant of Christ's blood to the old covenant of Sinai as expressed in the Ten Commandments and applied by the Old Testament prophets. This is perhaps its greatest importance for Christians today—to understand the ethical basis for Christian living, especially the role of the Old Testament.²

Sometimes called “the Proverbs of the New Testament,” the book of James practically and faithfully reminds Christians how to live wisely for Christ. In very short compass he offers concise counsel on an array of issues that confront every Christian on a daily basis:

- testing and trials
- poverty and riches
- favouritism and discrimination
- social justice and oppression
- the tongue and boasting
- worldliness and godliness

¹This article was originally presented as a paper at the annual Preaching Conference of the Reformed Theological College, which had as its theme “Preaching Biblical Wisdom.”

² Karen Jobes, *Letters to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 148.

- planning and providence
- justification and works
- faith and good deeds
- the law and obedience
- prayer and illness
- ...and more.

No Christian who is serious about living out his or her faith in this world can afford to ignore this intriguing and challenging letter, and no preacher who is concerned with helping his congregation live out its faith can afford to neglect preaching from this practical and penetrating letter from one of the early church's key leaders.

(1) A Discourse Approach for Preparing a Series of Sermon on James

In preparing to preach from the letter of James we need to make some attempt at outlining the book as a whole. We need to do this for at least two reasons:

- (1)** If a series of sermons is going to be based on the letter of James, then a clear understanding of the structure of the letter and specifically where key themes start and finish is imperative.
- (2)** The contribution an individual passage makes to the total message of the letter (a “bottom up” approach) and vice-versa (a “top down” approach) depends primarily on its location within that letter. For a New Testament letter like James this involves two main elements: (a) the general train-of-thought of the entire book and (b) the specific train-of-thought of the section of the book where the passage occurs.

The challenge in this case is that for centuries the letter of James has resisted the attempts of scholars and commentators to provide a neat and tidy outline of the book.³ Topics seem to appear and reappear at random. At

³ See Craig, L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 22-27.

first there appear to be few discourse markers that help us discern a logical flow and structure. This has led to a radical diversity with respect to an overall outline among commentators on the letter of James. Martin Luther, who famously held a low view of James, wrote that,

He throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper.⁴

However, we need not be so pessimistic. A discourse analysis of James would suggest that the “collocation of imperative commands with nominatives of direct address (most often ἀδελφοί, “brothers”) is the grammatical/cohesive tie that James utilizes to group his discourse into sections.”⁵ Each discrete discourse unit, introduced in this way, signals a new group of semantically related information. The second person imperative in each discourse unit serves as the main clause with the following indicative clauses providing support for the mainline imperatival command. “The main thrust of each section...is an appeal to readers to follow the divine viewpoint (‘wisdom from above’) by obeying the imperatival command that he has delivered. Consequently, his readers are exhorted to reject any human viewpoint (‘wisdom not from above’) about the ethical demands in the section.”⁶ The main sections of the book can then be displayed as follows:

⁴ Martin Luther, “Prefaces to the New Testament” (1522), *Luther’s Works* (Edited by E. Theodore Bachman. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 35:397. In 1976 German commentator Martin Dibelius similarly argued that many of the saying in James “are usually strung together quite loosely requiring their designation as series of sayings as opposed to groups of sayings...The results of this analysis are indeed complex, but they do lead to the recognition of one consistent feature of James: *the entire document lacks continuity in thought*. There is not only a lack of continuity in thought between individual sayings and other smaller units, but also between larger treatises” (Martin Dibelius, *James* [Hermeneia. Revised by Heinrich Greeven. Translated by Michael A. Williams. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], 1-2 [emphasis original]). Rather, with Richard Bauckham, I would prefer to say that “[i]t is a compendium of James’ wisdom, arranged, after an introductory epitome, in a series of discrete sections on various topics. Linear progression of thought is largely confined to each section. Coherence must be sought at a deeper level. The form and structure of the work are well suited to its purpose, which is to provide a resource for acquiring the wisdom that is expressed in obedience to God in everyday life”. Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 108.

⁵ W. Varner, *The Book of James—A New Perspective* (Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2010), 34.

⁶ Varner, *James*, 34-35.

Discourse Units in the Letter of James ⁷		
Section	Nominative of Address	Imperative Command/ Rhetorical Question
1:2–15	ἀδελφοί μου “my brothers”	πᾶσαν χαρὰν ἠγήσασθε “consider all joy”
1:16–18	ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί “my beloved brothers”	μὴ πλανᾶσθε “do not be deceived”
1:19–27	ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί “my beloved brothers”	ἴστε plus ἔστω “understand” plus “must be”
2:1–13	ἀδελφοί μου “my brothers”	μὴ ἐν προσωπολημψίαις ἔχετε “show no partiality as you hold”
2:14–26	ἀδελφοί μου “my brothers”	τί τὸ ὄφελος “what benefit is it”
3:1–12	ἀδελφοί μου “my brothers”	μὴ πολλοὶ διδάσκαλοι γίνεσθε “not many of you should become teachers”
3:13–18	ἐν ὑμῖν among you THEMATIC PEAK	τίς σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων “who is wise and understanding”
4:1–10	ἐν ὑμῖν “among you” HORTATORY PEAK	πόθεν πόλεμοι καὶ πόθεν μάχαι “from where conflicts and form where quarrels” 10 imperatives in 4:7–10
4:11–12	ἀδελφοί “brothers”	μὴ καταλαεῖτε ἀλλήλων “do not speak evil of one another”

⁷ Varner, *James*, 35.

4:13–17	οἱ λέγοντες “you who say”	ἄγε νῦν “come now”
5:1–6	οἱ πλοῦσοι “you rich”	ἄγε νῦν ... κλαύσατε “come now...weep”
5:7–11	ἀδελφοί “brothers”	μακροθυμήσατε be patient “plus 4 imperatives”
5:12–18	ἀδελφοί μου “my brothers”	μὴ ὀμνύετε “do not swear
5:19–20	ἀδελφοί μου “my brothers”	γινωσκέτω “he should know”

Based on this analysis the preacher is then ready to plan out a series of sermons based around this structure by using each major division as the basis for one sermon. While one could preach a magisterial series of thirty-nine sermons as John MacArthur has done,⁸ or twenty-eight sermons as R. Kent Hughes has done in his *Preaching the Word* series,⁹ most preachers and their congregations may prefer a briefer series.¹⁰ Based on the above analysis a series of fourteen sermons can be proposed:

Title: James: Faith that Works¹¹

1. From Trial to Triumph (1:1-15)
2. Do Not Be Deceived! (1:16-18)

⁸ See John MacArthur, *James* (MNTC. Chicago: Moody, 1998). This series was first preached in 1987 and has been edited down to 22 messages in his expositional commentary.

⁹ See R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works* (Preaching the Word. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1991).

¹⁰ Daniel Doriani in his Reformed Expository Commentary on *James* has seventeen sermons (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007) while William Baker and Thomas Ellsworth in their book *Preaching James* have only seven sermons (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005).

¹¹ This is the title of R. Kent Hughes volume of sermons on James in his “Preaching the Word” series.

3. Hear and Obey (1:19-27)
4. The Perils and Pitfalls of Partiality (2:1-13)
5. Justified by a Faith that Works (2:14-26)
6. The Taming of the Tongue (3:1-12)
7. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)
8. The Gravity of Grace (4:1-10)
9. Speak No Evil (4:11-12)
10. Planning and the Providence of God (4:13-17)
11. Riches that Rot (5:1-6)
12. The Patience of Job (5:7-11)
13. The Power of Righteous Praying (5:12-18)
14. Spiritual Reclamation (5:19-20)

(2) An Interpretative Approach for Preparing a Series of Sermon on James

The title “James: Faith that Works” says something important about how this book should be read. James gives us a hint as to how he would like us to read his letter in 1:22-25:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who *looks intently* at his natural face in a mirror. For he *looks at himself* and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Mirrors in James’ day, as most commentators acknowledge, were quite different from our modern crystalline inventions. They were generally made of polished bronze or copper and as a result produced a rather dim

reflection.¹² While one could gain a good general impression of oneself, one could not simply glance at such a mirror and learn very much.¹³ One would have to “look intently” or “consider carefully” (the Greek κατανοέω [*katanoēō*], implies both ideas) what one saw in the mirror (having teenagers back then must have clogged the bathroom up for a long time!).¹⁴ Robert Wall suggests that “[the] act of observing usually refers to the scrutiny of something important rather than the casual glance of one’s reflection in a mirror, soon forgotten.”¹⁵ Ralph Martin adds:

What is seen in the mirror is meant to lead to action, usually regarded as remedial. The face is seen to be dirty (going back to v 21) or blemished and needing attention.¹⁶

What all this implies is that James is not merely an ancient letter to be analysed, but also a letter to be embodied in the people of God. In this sense the letter of James is more like a Beethoven score or a Shakespearean play which are adequately interpreted only in performance. In the same way that a Beethoven sonata or a Shakespeare play has not been adequately interpreted until it has been performed, so, says Richard Bauckham,

We cannot sufficiently know what the biblical writings mean until they are appropriated and lived in the way they expect to be; that is, until we are involved in their performance and in the transformation they enable when appropriated in performance.¹⁷

Stephen Barton writes in a similar vein:

[Interpretation] *cannot* be primarily an “archaeological” task if the kind of text the Bible delivers its meaning only as it is “*played out*” in patterns of human action in Church, and society. Rather, on the performance analogy, biblical interpretation is something practical,

¹² In Pliny’s *Natural History* (36.66), he notes that glass mirrors were invented in the first century AD in Sidon (modern Lebanon). The earliest available examples of glass mirrors date from the second century.

¹³ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 90.

¹⁴ Behm, “κατανοέω,” *TDNT*, 4:975. See BDAG, s.v. κατανοέω, “to look at in a reflective manner, *consider, contemplate.*”

¹⁵ Robert Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letters of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International: 1997), 79-80

¹⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC. Waco, TX: Word, 1998), 50.

¹⁷ Bauckham, *James*, 176.

personal, communal and “political”: to do with changing and being changed according to the true image of the triune God whose story the Bible tells.¹⁸

N. T. Wright has argued in the same direction in his book *The New Testament and the People of God*. There he likens the task of New Testament interpretation to the improvisation of a lost fifth act of a Shakespearean play by skilled actors who have so immersed themselves in the first four acts—

Act 1: Creation

Act 2: Fall

Act 3: Israel

Act 4: Jesus

Act 5: Improv

—that they are able improvise in a way that is nevertheless thoroughly consistent with the canonical script:¹⁹

Among the detailed moves available within this model...is the possibility of seeing the biblical story as itself consisting of five acts. Thus: 1—Creation; 2—Fall; 3—Israel; 4—Jesus. The writing of the New Testament—including the writing of the gospels—would then form the first scene in the fifth act, and would simultaneously give hints of how the play is supposed to end. The fact of Act 4 being what it is shows what sort of a conclusion the drama should have, without making clear all the intervening steps. The church would then live under the “authority” of the extant story, being required to offer an improvisatory performance of the final act as it leads up to and anticipates the intended conclusion. The church is designed, according to this model, as a stage in the completion of the creator’s work of art: as Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, *autou gar esmen poiema*, we are his artwork.²⁰

¹⁸ Stephen C. Barton, “New Testament Interpretation as Performance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52:2 (1999): 184 (emphasis original).

¹⁹ See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 335.

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 141-2.

This model of performance requires both that we observe ourselves in the mirror, not the mirror itself, and that we do not forget but put into practical effect what we learn:

In performance we cannot keep a safely detached distance from the text, but in attempting its enactment incur the risk and struggle of being the people and the communities of whom the text speaks.²¹

The canonical script gives us direction for speaking truthfully in particular situations in light of the dramatic whole. But not only speaking—not only theologising. The truth must also be *done*. The canonical script gives direction to the church for expressing the truth of the Gospel in terms of everyday practices—caring for widows and orphans, seeking justice for the oppressed, praying for the sick, forgiving one another, treating the rich and the poor with equal honour—to name a few from the letter of James. In the end, it is not just about knowing the script (“knowledge”), it is about bearing witness to it with our lives (“wisdom”). (The term “martyr” comes from the Greek word μάρτυς, “one who witnesses at cost of life, martyr”).²² *Telling* the truth must never be separated from *doing* the truth. As Francis Young says: “The teaching is embodied in the people.”²³ Thus we may observe the following:

(a) Truth is Dramatic and Didactic

Truth is dramatic not just didactic: it is something to be *done* as well as something to be *taught*; it is something to be *lived* as well as something to be *learned*; it is something to be *enacted* as well as something to be *exegeted*; it something to be *celebrated* as well as something to be *communicated*.

²¹ Bauckham, *James*, 177.

²² See BDAG, s.v. μάρτυς (3).

²³ Francis Young, *Theology of Pastoral Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 160.

(b) The Church is the Dramatic Company

Kevin Vanhoozer notes: “The church is a corporate rendering of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit. Specifically, the church’s task is to witness, in word and deed, to the truth of Christ and his kingdom. ‘Take up your Script and talk!’” [to which I would add “and walk”]²⁴

(c) Scripture as the Dramatic Script

The Spirit is the primary director of the drama whose directions have been communicated and preserved in the authoritative script. We are a “people of the book”; we are actually the people of the redemptive drama for which “the book” is the authoritative script.²⁵ The goal of the church (“the company of the gospel”)²⁶ is to both creatively and faithfully follow its textual directions in the power of the Spirit.

(d) The Pastor is the Assistant Director

The role of the preacher, as an assistant director (or regional director), is to analyse that script and to help his people creatively embody that script by engaging in the right dramatic practices in their own local contexts—that is the heart of wisdom. Kevin Vanhoozer describes this aspect of the pastor’s role like this:

While the Holy Spirit is the primary director who oversees the global production, it is the pastor who bears the primary responsibility for overseeing local performances...The director is the mediator between the script and the actors...The director’s work is primarily that of communication: to the actors about the meaning of the script and then, indirectly through the actors, to the audience about the meaning of the play. The church communicates the meaning of the play through its bodily action. ... The pastor/director needs to instil confidence in a congregation that playing this script is the way to truth and abundant life. Such direction is communicated largely through preaching, an obedient “listening to the text on behalf of the church.”²⁷

²⁴ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 418.

²⁵ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 419.

²⁶ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 399 (this is the subtitle of chapter 12 of his book).

²⁷ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 448, 449.

(e) The Sermon involves Script Analysis and Situation Analysis

Vanhoozer concludes by explaining the role of the sermon in this way:

The sermon, not some leadership philosophy or management scheme, remains the prime means of pastoral direction and hence the pastor's paramount responsibility. The good sermon contains both script analysis and situation analysis. It is in the sermon that the pastor weaves together theo-dramatic truth and local knowledge. The sermon is the best frontal assault on imaginations held captive by secular stories that promise other ways to the good life. Most important, the sermon envisions ways for the local congregation to become a parable of the kingdom of God. It is the pastor's/director's vocation to help congregations hear (understand) and do (perform) God's word in and for the present.²⁸

Observe that the role of the preacher is not just to help his people *understand* the word of God (knowledge), but also to *perform* the word of God in their local contexts (wisdom); and he does this both by *proclaiming* the text to his people and *practicing* the text *before* his people. Biblical wisdom involves a way of life, not merely a system of belief. It involves both *theory* (knowledge) and *practice* (life) for the sake of this pastoral function: assisting people to enjoy and glorify God.²⁹

(3) A Theological Approach for Preparing a Series of Sermon on James

So, what does biblical wisdom look like for James? What is his pastoral burden? What is at the heart of his message to the churches he addresses in the opening lines of his letter? Most commentators note that wisdom is most significant:

[W]isdom is the orienting concern of this book by which all else is understood: after all, James refers to wisdom as the divine "word of truth," which is graciously provided to a faithful people to make sense of their trials and to guide them through those trials in order to ensure their future destiny in the new creation.³⁰

²⁸ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 449

²⁹ Modified from Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 13.

³⁰ Robert W. Wall, "James, Letter of," in *Dictionary of Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Edited by R.P. Martin and Peter H. Davids. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 552.

Karen Jobes similarly observes: “Wisdom is not a topic or theme of the book of James, but is an assumed value essential for Christian living and under which all the various topics of the book are subsumed.”³¹ But what does wisdom look like for James? Much could be said here,³² but for the sake of brevity we will focus our attention on four broad categories that undergird and drive James’s wisdom theology.

(a) Biblical Wisdom is Embraced Holistically

First, James offers biblical wisdom for living lives characterised by “wholeness,” “completeness,” or “integrity.” Douglas Moo states:

Basic to all that James says in his letter is his concern that his readers stop compromising with worldly values and behaviour and give themselves wholly to the Lord. Spiritual “wholeness,” then, we suggest, is the central concern of the letter.³³

When engaged in debate with others who accused him of being two-faced, Abraham Lincoln would often quip:

If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?³⁴

³¹ Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 167. See also Bauckham, *James*, 93-11; Mark E. Taylor and George H. Guthrie, “The Structure of James,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 68 (2006): 681-705; Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 675-76. Frank Thielman, *A Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), writes: “James fits into a genre of Jewish aphoristic literature of which the books of Proverbs and Sirach serve as the best ancient examples. Here loosely arranged aphorisms on a variety of topics alternate with longer ‘treatises’ on various themes, all of them designed to encourage the reader to live wisely—to live under the fear of the Lord and therefore according to God’s law.” He goes on to suggest that “James probably decided to mix the epistolary genre with ‘wisdom paraenesis’ to provide a format for the publication of his wisdom collection.”

³² For a more detailed study see Christopher Morgan, *A Theology of James: Wisdom for God’s People* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010).

³³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 46. Bauckham, *James*, 177, concurs, “Careful study shows that this is not just one important theme, but the overarching theme of the whole letter, encompassing all other major concerns.” See also Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 500.

³⁴ Augustin Stucker, *Lincoln & Davis: A Dual Biography of America’s Civil War Presidents* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011), 124

Twice James refers to those who are not living in covenant faithfulness to God as διψυχος (*dipsychos*), literally “double-minded” (James 1:8; 4:8):

He is a double-minded [διψυχος]³⁵ man, unstable in all his ways.

If the greatest commandment is to love God with one’s whole being—“with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27)—“then to be doubled-minded about God is to fail miserably.”³⁶ While the term διψυχος (“double-minded”) may be unique to James,³⁷ probably even coined by him, the idea was common in Jewish wisdom literature (e.g., Wisdom, 1:1-2; Hosea 10:2; 1QH XII 14-16).³⁸ In 4:1-2 James points to the double-mindedness as the root cause of conflict and strife within the Christian community to which he writes:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? *Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

Moreover James begins his letter with a justly famous passage introducing the overarching theme of “wholeness” and “completeness” (1:2-4):

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be *perfect* and *complete, lacking in nothing*.³⁹

This theme of “wholeness” and “perfection” runs through the letter like a silver thread (1:4, 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2). The “whole” person in James consists

³⁵ BDAG, s.v. διψυχος, “pert[aining] to being uncertain about the truth of someth[ing], *doubting, hesitating*, lit. *double-minded* J[ame]s 4:8”.

³⁶ Jobes, *Letters to the Churches*, 222.

³⁷ BDAG note that Parmenides 6, 5 speaks of δίκρανοι=double-headed people, who stagger helplessly here and there in their thinking, but observe that διψυχος is not found outside of James 1:8 and 4:8 (s.v. διψυχος).

³⁸ The *Thanksgiving Scroll* of Qumran refers to those who “look for you with a double heart” (1QH XII 14 [in Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts and English* (Second edition. Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1992), 334]). See also Oscar J. F. Seitz, “Afterthoughts on the Term *Dipsychos*,” *New Testament Studies* 4 (1958), 328

³⁹ See also 1 QH VIII, 12-16, 25.

in the heart (mind, emotions, will), the tongue and the mouth (words), and the hand or the whole body (deeds).⁴⁰ Again and again, James calls for such integrity and essentially asserts:

“Stop saying one thing and doing something else. Stop claiming to have faith and yet not be trusting God in your trials. Listen to the word and obey it. Do not presume you are religious if, you do not take care of the oppressed. Do not claim to keep the law of love while the whole time you treat the poor with disrespect. Do not claim to praise God with the very tongue with which you curse people made in his image. Do not claim to revere the law, while you slander others. Do not merely claim to have faith; demonstrate it!”⁴¹

As Christopher Morgan observes:

Throughout his epistle, James opposes duplicity and double-mindedness and calls for holistic Christianity—churches actually living out the gospel, not just claiming to embrace it.⁴²

(b) Biblical Wisdom is Viewed Eschatologically

One of the chief characteristics that distinguishes James’ moral teaching both from Jewish wisdom literature on the one hand, and perfectionism on the other,⁴³ is the eschatological framework within which he sets his wisdom teaching. Perhaps two of the most important clues to James’s eschatology can be found in 5:3 and 5:7-9. First, in James 5:7-9 we read:

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until *the coming of the Lord* [τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου]. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for *the coming of the Lord is at hand* [ἡ παρουσία τοῦ κυρίου ἤγγικεν]. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

⁴⁰ Bauckham, *James*, 178. This is why James can say in 2:18: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

⁴¹ Morgan, *A Theology of James*, 56.

⁴² Morgan, *A Theology of James*, 56.

⁴³ See John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *The Works of John Wesley* (London: James Nichols, 1829), 11:366-446.

Twice James refers to “the coming of the Lord” using the Greek word παρουσία (*parousia*, “coming, advent”),⁴⁴ the standard word used in the New Testament to refer to the return of Christ (Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 8, 9; 2 Peter 3:4; 1 John 2:28).⁴⁵ Moreover, in this passage James is seen to connect the *parousia* to Jesus’ role as Judge: “the Judge is standing at the door” (v 9). As Karen Jobes points out:

The doctrine of the *parousia* as presented in the New Testament necessarily entails the resurrected state of Jesus and his presence with the Father, from where he will come ‘to judge the living and the dead,’ as the Apostle’s Creed put it.⁴⁶

James frequently warns his readers about the coming judgement of the Lord in order to stimulate his readers to adopt right attitudes and right behaviour (1:10-12; 2:12-13; 3:1; 4:10; 5:1-6, 9, 12, 20).⁴⁷ This is further enhanced by the sense of imminence that James feels when he writes of the *parousia*. Notice the language used in this passage:

the coming of the Lord is *at hand* (ἡ παρουσία τοῦ κυρίου ἤγγικεν, v 8).

behold, the Judge is *standing at the door* (πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἕστηκεν, v 9; with the Greek perfect tense of “is standing” adding emphasis).⁴⁸

This, coupled with James’s conviction that they are living “in the last days” (ἐν ἑσχάταις ἡμέραις; “You have laid up treasure *in the last days*,” 5:3), stems from James’s basic conviction that now that the Messiah had come and the new age has dawned they were indeed living in the last days and that the next event in the divine timetable was the end of history.⁴⁹ As Morgan points out: “James views salvation history in terms of the already

⁴⁴ BDAG, s.v. παρουσία (2).

⁴⁵ See Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 196.

⁴⁶ Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 196.

⁴⁷ See Moo, *James*, 30.

⁴⁸ See Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; London: Continuum, 1994), 23: “Recent work by linguists in the analysis of discourse differentiates the planes of discourse into three: background, foreground and frontground....The aorist is the background tense, which forms the basis for the discourse; the present is the foreground tense, which introduces significant characters or makes appropriate climactic references to concrete situations; and the perfect is the frontground tense, which introduces elements in an even more discrete, defined, contoured and complex way.”

⁴⁹ See Moo, *James*, 30.

and the not yet; the kingdom has already arrived, but has not yet been finally consummated.”⁵⁰ We see this tension, for example, in James 1:18:

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

The words “of his creatures” (τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων) at the end of v 18 suggest that believers form the “firstfruits” (ἀπαρχήν) of a harvest that will eventually culminate in God’s redemption of the whole creation. As McCartney observes:

The term [“firstfruits”] therefore is eschatological...and James’s designation of believers as “firstfruits”...places them in the category of those who are already experiencing the full redemption that the rest of creation awaits.⁵¹

We also see it (coming back to the theme with which we began this section) in the tension between James’s call to perfection, completeness, and wholeness on the one hand (1:4, 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2), and the immaturity, incompleteness, and division evident in James’s communities on the other (e.g., 1:12-15; 2:1-7; 4:1-10). It is within the tension of this “already...not yet” eschatological framework that we must interpret and apply James’s ethical teaching. We need to challenge our listeners to push on to perfection, wholeness and maturity, but we must at the same time remind them that this will be a life-long process that will not be completed in this life.

(c) Biblical Wisdom is Christologically Determined

We have argued that the context within which biblical wisdom must be lived out is that space in-between-times, that is, between the first and second coming of Christ. This naturally leads to the importance of Christology for James’s wisdom teaching. The New Testament teaching about Jesus Christ is right at the heart of Christianity, and judged by such a Christocentric criterion, the letter of James has not fared all that well in church history.⁵²

⁵⁰ Morgan, *A Theology of James*, 166.

⁵¹ Dan G. McCartney, *James* (BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 111. See also Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 75.

⁵² Luther, “Prefaces to the New Testament,” *Works*, 35:396-97: “Its purpose is to teach Christians, but in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times; however he teaches nothing about him,

We do not have the space to develop a full-blown Christology of James, but in this and the next section we will consider briefly the relevance of Christology and the gospel for James’s wisdom teaching. The following should be noted with regard to James’s Christology:

- (1) In a letter of this length we should not necessarily expect a lot to be said about the person and work of Christ. This is an occasional letter written to a group of churches for whom Christology was not a controversial issue. James was therefore able to assume a good deal of knowledge about the person and work of Christ and thus felt free to deal with the particular issues plaguing this church. This is what Gordon Fee has labeled “task theology—theology being written for or brought to bear on the task at hand.”⁵³
- (2) Having said that, we do see an extremely high Christology presented in what James does have to say about Jesus’ Christ. James begins his letter with these words (1:1):

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We may note the following:

- (a) First, James, by speaking of himself as (literally) a “slave” (δοῦλος, *doulos*)⁵⁴ of both “God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ,” implies that they

but only speaks of general faith in God. Now it is the office of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ, and to lay the foundation for faith in him...And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ...But James does nothing more than drive to the law and to its works.” Robert B. Sloan, “The Christology of James,” *Criswell Theological Review* 1, no.1 (1986): 3, writes: “The book [James] has become better known for its omissions than its affirmations. ...To be sure, what is not (apparently) in the book of James may be at first striking. There is no mention of the cross...the resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, or baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Most noticeable perhaps among the omissions in this New Testament book are frequent references to Jesus and His Christological titles.”

⁵³ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* (3d ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 58. He continues: “The occasional nature of the epistles also means that they are not first of all theological treatises, nor are they summaries of Paul’s or Peter’s [or James’s] theology. There is theology implied, but it is always ‘task theology’ theology being written for or brought to bear on the task at hand.”

⁵⁴ On the translation of this word see Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (NSBT 8. Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 17-24.

both have the same status and authority.⁵⁵ As Schreiner points out, “[t]his is quite shocking for a Jewish monotheist.”⁵⁶

- (b) Second, the word “Christ,” translating the Greek word Χριστός (*Christos*), is the equivalent for the Hebrew word *Messiah*, making him the eschatological Messiah, the promised Davidic king, and the fulfilment of Old Testament messianic hope.⁵⁷
- (c) Third, by referring to him as “Lord” (κύριος, *kurios*, 1:1; 2:1; 5:7a-8), his favourite title for Jesus, James employs one of the most common titles for God in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and indeed in his own letter (1:6-7, 3:9; 4:10; 5:4; 5:10; 5:11). As William Baker notes:

The significance of James applying to Jesus the Septuagintal word for Yahweh who covenanted with Israel cannot be overstated. Yet, in doing this, James parallels what must have become common practice among early Christians, since calling Jesus as “Lord” is commonplace in the New Testament.⁵⁸

This is all the more remarkable in light of James’s statement in 2:19: “God is one” (εἷς ἐστιν ὁ θεός, 2:19). As Karen Jobes observes:

James is a monotheistic Jew, writing to people who also believe in the one God of Judaism. It is therefore quite remarkable how James uses “Lord” in his letter to refer both to God [1:6-7, 3:9; 4:10; 5:4; 5:10; 5:11] and to Jesus [1:1; 2:1; 5:7-8], and in some cases feeling no need to resolve the ambiguity.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 185: “James is declaring himself to be in the same relationship of submission to Jesus that he is to God, and by this analogy, he gives Jesus a remarkably high authority. James considers himself a servant of both God and of Jesus Christ, expressing no tension or competition between his two masters.”

⁵⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 400-401: “James is a *doulos* (‘slave’ my translation) of both God and Jesus Christ, and this implies that God and Jesus Christ share the same status. The equivalency posited by James is highly significant because his letter has a Jewish character and explicitly affirms monotheism (James 2:19).”

⁵⁷ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 401; Morgan, *A Theology of James*, 150-51.

⁵⁸ William R. Baker, “Christology in the Epistle of James,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, 74, no. 1 (2002): 53.

⁵⁹ Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 185.

- (d) Fourth, not only does James refer to Jesus as “the Lord,” but as “the Lord of glory” or “the glorious Lord”—the Greek can be read either way (τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης, 2:1). In any case, the “glory” (τῆς δόξης, *tēs doxēs*) typically associated with God is ascribed here to Jesus Christ (cf. Exod 16:7, 10; 24:17; Lev 9:6).⁶⁰
- (e) Fifth, just as James acknowledges that “God is one” (2:19), so also he declares that “[t]here is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy” (4:12). In the Old Testament judgment was the prerogative of God alone, yet we see James describing Jesus in the same role at his return (5:7-9):

Be patient, therefore, brothers, *until the coming of the Lord*. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, *for the coming of the Lord is at hand*. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; *behold, the Judge is standing at the door*.⁶¹

- (3) Not only does James view Jesus as exercising the divine prerogative of judgement, James also views Jesus as sharing in the divine role as “lawgiver” (cf. James 4:12, “[t]here is only one lawgiver”). This is seen in the many echoes of Jesus’ teaching in James’ letter, especially in Matthew’s Gospel and Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.⁶² James never mentions Jesus as the source of his material, but he has so immersed himself in the teachings of Jesus, that so much of what he teaches in his letter sounds very similar to what Jesus’ taught.⁶³ Karen Jobes states:

⁶⁰ See Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 401.

⁶¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 242: “Another key aspect of God’s sole sovereignty over creation was his prerogative of judgment: his rule is just, implementing justice, and therefore judging nations and individuals. Such divine prerogatives have to be understood, not as mere functions that God may delegate to others, but as intrinsic to the divine identity. Ruling over all, giving life to all, exercising judgment on all—these belong integrally to the Jewish understanding of who God is.”

⁶² For which see Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 193.

⁶³ See Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 192.

By using Jesus' teaching as the basis of his ethical exhortation, James is submitting to and communicating the authority of Jesus as normative for his Christian readers. Jesus' teaching was so integrated into James's thoughts that his own exhortations are re-expressions of the Lord's words.⁶⁴

(d) Biblical Wisdom is Rooted in God's Sovereign Saving Grace

Fourth, biblical wisdom as taught by James is profoundly gospel-centred. Biblical wisdom cannot be reduced to a series of inspiration tweets, bumper stickers, or fridge magnets which calls us to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Rather, James's call for radical obedience is not for conformity to legitimate external rules, but for the total transformation of a person by the sovereign grace of God. James roots salvation in the sovereignty and grace of God and for him everything else flows out of that:

(1) Salvation has its origin in *the electing will of God* and results in *saving faith*:

"Listen, my beloved brothers, *has not God chosen* those who are poor in the world *to be rich in faith* and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5).

(2) Salvation flows out of *the grace of God*:

"But *he gives more grace*. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but *gives grace* to the humble" (James 4:6). Notice here the total absence of human merit: God has chosen *the poor*; God has given grace to *the humble*.

(3) Salvation is rooted in *the regenerating work of God*:

"*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth*, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18).

⁶⁴ Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 185.

As Calvin says:

Here he gives an important example of the divine goodness he has propounded: God has given us new birth, unto everlasting life....In saying that God *brought us forth* of his own intention and volition, he means that he was not influenced by any external force...In fact, he is saying that God brought us forth because of his own good-pleasure, that he was an influence upon himself....[Thus] the passage shows how our election, before the foundation of the world, was an act of freedom; and so we are brought to the light of the knowledge of truth by the sheer grace of God, and our vocation matches our election.⁶⁵

In this way what the gospel calls us to do is always rooted in what God has first done for us. As Murray Capill states:

This grounding of Christian ethics in the gospel can be seen throughout the New Testament and it needs to be explicit in our preaching as well. For every command issued, preachers should ask themselves, "Have I given gospel reasons for why this is important and have I shown the gospel resources that enable obedience?" We will only develop helpful living application when the gospel itself drives our exhortations.⁶⁶

As Capill notes elsewhere:

The first implication for the preacher, then, is that preaching must invariably begin with what God has done. All that we call for and all that we want people to aspire to must be rooted in what God has already done. Sermons ought to be full of the acts of God. All good application depends on that....It is the only basis for understanding the glorious grace of the gospel. It is the foremost means of giving people hope beyond themselves.⁶⁷

That is exactly what James does: again and again he grounds our obedience to the teaching of Jesus Christ in the sovereign electing, regenerating, and transforming grace of God.

⁶⁵ John Calvin, *A Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke, James and Jude* (Translated by A. W. Morrison. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:270. See also Thomas Manton, *James* (1693. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1962), 114-128.

⁶⁶ Murray Capill, *The Heart is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2014), 228.

⁶⁷ Capill, *The Heart is the Target*, 218.

Conclusion: Biblical Wisdom is Driven Pastorally

Believers display the reality of their election, regeneration, and faith through covenant faithfulness and not the other way round. They bear the fruit of wisdom, obey God's word, love the people of God, show mercy to the needy, display an appropriate attitude to poverty and riches, acknowledge the providence of God in all their planning, joyfully endure testing and trials, put their faith into action, and aspire to godliness and not worldliness—to revisit just a few themes that we observed at the beginning of this article. In this way we see again how holistically and pastorally driven James's wisdom teaching is. As William Baker says:

The central theological task is and has always been pastoral, assisting people to know God, and by knowing him to be enabled to strive toward the excellence of his character in their own lives.... Theologians such as the well-known Calvin and the less-known Basil of Caesarea recognized this to be their calling...Such an enterprise [can be labelled] "sapiential theology," or theology which, through understanding Scripture, enables everyday Christians to live wisely and well. It was a marriage of mind and heart, or mind and spirit. So it must be today.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ William R. Baker, "Christology in the Epistle of James," *Evangelical Quarterly* 74 (2002):48, quoting Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5, 115.