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**The Nature of Eternal Security in James:
Divine Grace Pairs with the Imitatio Dei**

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Abstract

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Introduction

The epistle of James is not generally one that people turn to when they wish to explore the idea of eternal security. James has the reputation of being the epistle of “works,” of the law and legalism, of promoting the dreaded “works-righteousness.” Even Luther failed to see the epistle as doing more when he argued: “it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works [2:24]” and that “James does nothing more than drive to the law and to its works.” Ultimately, Luther concludes, James “wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, but was unequal to the task. He tries to accomplish by harping on the law what the apostles accomplish by stimulating people to love.”³ Luther explicitly expresses what others subsequently have merely felt about the epistle,

¹ Mariam is co-author with Craig Blomberg of the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary: James* (Series eds. George Guthrie and Clinton E. Arnold. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). She has also published several articles on James.

² See www.St-Andrews.ac.uk.

³ E. Theodore Bachmann, ed., *Luther's Works: Word and Sacrament I*, Vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 396-97.

this writing seen as God-lite and human-heavy. As Dibelius emphasizes repeatedly, “*Jas has no ‘theology’.*”⁴

What these interpretations fail to do, however, is to give James the credit of being a wisdom text where short elliptical sayings actually bear as much—if not more—weight than longer expository sentences.⁵ The technique for reading a wisdom text, especially one influenced by apocalyptic writings as James was,⁶ is quite different from reading an exposition of the sort that Paul wrote or a history such as the gospels.⁷ But when James is read carefully, several things become apparent contrary to the popular opinions. First, James sees all of the Christian life as originating from and by God’s grace. Second, the emphasis on human action is intended as a response to

⁴ M Dibelius, *James*, trans. Michael A. Williams, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 21, see also p. 22, where he states that paraenesis, “by its very nature cannot at all bring together a coherent structure of theological thought,” and again p. 48, 81, etc. Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Black’s NTC (London: A. & C. Black, 1980), 27-28, agrees by at least conceding a very simplistic theology underlying James’ ethics.

⁵ In contrast see Dibelius, *James*, 48, who states, “Various matters are only touched upon in Jas. That this happens in so casual a way need not indicate a lack of interest; on the other hand, it could be accidental that a matter is mentioned in Jas at all.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 18, rebuts Dibelius’ primitive understanding of paraenesis, emphasizing the importance of maxims within the book and concludes that it is a “coherent discourse” and a “deliberately composed piece of rhetoric” (21), within which the individual sayings should be taken as rhetorically intentional for emphasis. Ben Witherington, III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007), 391, emphasizes “One needs to know how such sapiential language works in order to understand its intended effect. Sapiential rhetoric is often compressed into pithy or even paradoxical maxims with brief support in order that they be both memorable and memorizable. The implications require a certain unpacking, and the density of the ideas deliberately forces meditation and reflection.”

⁶ As argued most sustainably by Todd C. Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology: Re-reading an Ancient Christian Letter*, JSNTSS 121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), who views James as more an apocalyptic than sapiential text. See also Patrick J. Hartin, “Who is Wise and Understanding Among You? (James 3:13): An Analysis of Wisdom, Eschatology, and Apocalypticism in the Letter of James,” in *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, ed. Benjamin G. Wright, III, and Lawrence M. Wills (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 149-68; Matt Jackson-McCabe, “A Letter to the Twelve Tribes in the Diaspora: Wisdom and ‘Apocalyptic’ Eschatology in the Letter of James,” *SBLSP* 35 (1996), 504-17. James, however, is primarily a wisdom text, but one that uses eschatology freely as motivation for how one should act now. As Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 39, puts it, “eschatology is not the burden of the book; it is the context of the book.” J. Eugene Botha, “Simple Salvation, but Not of Straw... Jacobean Soteriology,” in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 397, agrees: “It must be made clear that for James eschatology is not the focus. . . . The fact that the day of the Lord is near serves as a motivation to be even more observant of the correct behaviour in order to be found perfect when the *parousia* takes place.”

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 114, observes, “The most important gain from breaking the Pauline fixation is that it liberates James to be read in terms of 108 verses rather than 12 verses, in terms of its own voice rather than in terms of its supposed muting of Paul’s voice.”

this grace and God’s character. And thirdly, in the end God—the giving, good, generous, merciful God—is the only one who decides the fate of each person, and his vote is on the side of mercy for those who have emulated his character. These facts do not lessen James’ concern that human actions reveal genuine faith, they merely help to clarify James’ soteriology and place it within the framework of divine work.

A. God’s Initial Call and Character

The author of the epistle of James has a number of crucial statements about God’s character that shape the theology of the epistle as a whole, many of them laid out in chapter one as the foundation for the rest of the epistle. Some of the key points we will examine below are God’s generous nature to his people, God’s initiatory activity in calling and redeeming, God’s work in righting oppression, and ultimately God’s role as judge. This last one we will leave till the third section of the paper, however, as it is the piece that ultimately holds the theology of the epistle together in this area of eternal security. Along with those theological themes, there is clear evidence that James found the teaching of Jesus to be authoritative and a source for a number of sayings.⁸ His two references to Jesus, therefore, ought to be read along with how James incorporates his teaching, together affirming a high view of Jesus as Christ. We will begin by unpacking the key texts that help us understand James’ theology and his view of God’s gracious work in calling and redeeming his people.⁹

To begin, James immediately describes himself as a “servant/slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ The absence of a separate article between “God” and “Lord Jesus Christ” possibly indicates an early equation between the two characters, a very early

⁸ Cf. Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999); Patrick J. Hartin, *James and the Q Sayings of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); Dean B. Depepe, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James* (Chelsea, Mich.: Bookcrafters, 1989); John S. Kloppenborg, “The Emulation of the Jesus Tradition in the Letter of James,” in *Reading James with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James*, ed. Robert L. Webb, and John S. Kloppenborg (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 121-50.

⁹ As William F. Brosend, *James and Jude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 48, notes, “in a letter best known for its uncompromising call to faithful Christian practice, verses that emphasize God’s goodness and gifts should themselves be emphasized.”

¹⁰ Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δούλος (1:1a). All translations mine.

recognition of Christ's divinity.¹¹ At the least it shows that James thought equally of being the servant of God and of Jesus.¹²

The next key verse about God comes in 1:5 where James notes, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, that one should ask of the giving God [who gives] to all generously and without reproach and it will be given to him/her."¹³ This verse gives us a crucial insight into the author's understanding of God. He calls God "the giving God," smashing the descriptive participle into the very title of God and making it absolutely clear that generosity is a primary trait of this God.¹⁴ Instead of qualifying an elite group as the recipients of this generosity, James specifies that God gives to *everyone* generously. The term for "generously" as it is here translated could also mean something more like "single-mindedly,"¹⁵ an idea which makes a great deal of sense in contrast with the "double-minded" person about to appear in 1:7, a person presented as the antithesis of all that God is and wants.¹⁶ Regardless of which interpretation one chooses, the point is that God gives to anyone who asks without stinting.¹⁷ As if that were not enough, James then continues with a negative description: that God gives "without reproach." Besides expanding on the picture of God's sheer generosity, this phrase also unlocks the idea that *God does not expect his people to have wisdom except as a gift from him.*¹⁸

¹¹ Craig L. Blomberg, and Mariam J. Kamell, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 47, concede that, in contrast to 2 Pet. 1:1 and Tit. 2:13, "Because 'slave' is anarthrous, 'God' and 'Lord' follow suit, which means that Granville Sharp's rule . . . does not come into play. But except for the article, all of the necessary elements are present, so this *could* be an early equation of Jesus with God. . . . 'The Lord Jesus Christ' is the fullest of the many combinations of the name Jesus with various titles or appellations in the NT," the latter fact of which should encourage understand James as having a high view of Jesus.

¹² See Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC 48 (Waco: Word, 1988), 6-7, for further explanation of this title.

¹³ Εἰ δέ τις ὑμῶν λείπεται σοφίας, αἰτείτω παρὰ τοῦ διδόντος θεοῦ πᾶσιν ἀπλῶς καὶ μὴ ὀνειδίζοντος καὶ δοθήσεται αὐτῷ.

¹⁴ The present tense nature of the participle suggests the possibility of repeated or continual giving as God's nature.

¹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar NTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 59.

¹⁶ It (ἀπλῶς) could also mean "sincerely, without hesitation." Cf. Davids, *Epistle of James*, 72-73.

¹⁷ See the discussion in F. J. A. Hort, *The Epistle of St James* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1909), 7-9, who settles on "graciously" as the best translation.

¹⁸ Friedrich Spitta, *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur des Urchristentums*, Vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1896), 20, finds Wisdom 9:6 ("for even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you") to lie in the background of this statement. Dibelius, *James*, 77, however, finds James 1:5 merely to be "a saying about prayer," not [Footnote continued on next page ...]

God does not condemn the petitioner for their lack of wisdom, instead, he *generously gives* the very thing that they need in order to become mature and complete (1:4).

The warning to the doubter that follows in 1:6-8 makes clear how important this aspect of God's character is.¹⁹ To hesitate in requesting what God wants to give reveals either doubt God's character as generous or vacillation regarding the value of wisdom.²⁰ This double-mindedness does not please God. He seeks to give to his people everything that they need to please him, but those who doubt, like those who seek friendship with the world (4:4), reveal that they are uncertain whether they want to please God and thus cut themselves off from the help he desires to give. This is the first indication we have been given that, while God is aboundingly generous, an improper response can exclude a person from being a recipient.²¹

James 1:9-11 reveals an interesting side to God's character. Drawing on imagery consistent from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isa. 40:6-7) as well as from the witness of nature around, this passage gives a microcosm of God's work in righting the wrongs done on earth. Those who are "humble" can rejoice now that God will raise them up (see also Jas. 4:6, 10). In contrast, those who define themselves by their wealth rather than by their relationship to God can

wisdom more generally. Hort, *Epistle of St James*, 7, sees this as the "human and practical idea of wisdom," wherein "wisdom is the knowledge of the most essential facts and the power to walk instinctively by their light."

¹⁹ Dibelius, *James*, 80, sees "faith" here as strictly related to "faith and doubt" and "the granting of petitions made in prayer," not a larger theological statement of "faith" as related to chapter 2. He argues, "in paraenesis too many diverse elements are combined to allow one to draw inferences from one passage to another." Fairly, but perhaps too limiting again, he notes that here the dualism relates to "vacillation between certainty and uncertainty with regard to whether prayer will be answered" (83). Cf. Sirach 1:28. In contrast, Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, NAC 36 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 66, sees this doubt as simply about "about what kind of God the believer serves," and not in particular relation to prayer. In context, it seems reasonable to see both types of doubt in play.

²⁰ C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1996), 31, highlights these two failings: "Sometimes the misgiving which undermines the effectiveness of faith springs from doubt about God, whether He is willing or perhaps whether He is able to solve our problem. Sometimes, however, the misgiving arises because of our own divided heart. Part of us is pathetically eager to receive the good gift God is ready to bestow, but another part of us does not want the gift, shrinking from the change the gift would make in our lives." He continues, "the confident assurances of God's generous dealings with all who come to Him in faith changes to a stern warning addressed to any who may be in danger of presuming on this merciful kindness," looking for "cheap grace" (32).

²¹ Cf. Davids, *Epistle of James*, 75.

“rejoice” in their imminent downfall.²² While there are many conflicting interpretations regarding whether the rich can be considered Christian and whether this humiliation is of an eschatological nature,²³ the larger point of the passage is that believers can trust God not only to give generously but to right the wrongs that oppression wreaks in this world. This theme appears most strongly again in James 5:1-12, with the oration against the wealthy and the encouragement to persevere. In a theological framework in which the Lord works to rectify wrongdoing and oppression, the idea that the Lord is near (5:9) would indeed be a comfort—or a warning.²⁴

Leaving aside James 1:12 for the later discussion on God’s justice, James 1:13-18 makes clear God’s nature and intentions toward his people. First, in verses 13-15, James makes very clear the origin of temptation and absolves God of blame. We fall into sin because we first entertain our desires as thoughts and from there they take hold of us, controlling us.²⁵ Thus, instead of being controlled by

²² See Mariam J. Kamell, “The Economics of Humility: The Rich and the Humble in James,” in *Economic Dimensions of Early Christianity*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker, and Kelly Leibengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2009), for an in-depth examination of these debates as well as a defense of the position taken here of the “rich” as those who identify themselves through their wealth.

²³ The traditional interpretation is that “brother” (ἀδελφός) is carried over from verse 10 to verse 11, so that the rich being warned are also Christians (cf. J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916], 145). On this reading, the “downfall” is either a reminder of their humiliating state as *Christians* (cf. James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 61-62) or a reminder of the reality of their mortality (cf. Moo, *James*, 68). H. H. Drake Williams, III, “Of Rags and Riches: The Benefits of Hearing Jeremiah 9:23-24 Within James 1:9-11,” *TynB* 53 (2002), 281, shows how Jer. 9:23-24 regularly functions as prophetic language to call God’s people to re-evaluate their dependence on wealth for their strength, thus this is yet another prophetic call warning against such an understanding. On the other hand, liberation theologians tend to argue for a much stronger reading where ἀδελφός in verse 10 is intentionally only used with the “poor” and not with the “rich, and that the call to “boast” is highly ironic as they are indeed called to boast in their damnation (cf. Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, Reprint ed. [Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004], 44; Martin, *James*, 26; George M Stulac, “Who Are ‘The Rich’ in James?,” *Presbyterion* 16 [1990], 92, who sees the term plou/sioj as uniformly negative in James; Brosend, *James and Jude*, 43; Dibelius, *James*, 85).

²⁴ As Witherington, *Letters and Homilies*, 538, notes, “James is reminding his readers that judgment includes, even starts, with the house of God.” In passages such as these, we are reminded of Mary’s triumphant affirmation in the Magnificat (Lk. 1:51-53), where the rich and the proud are thrown down while the poor and hungry are clothed and fed.

²⁵ Walter T Wilson, “Sin as Sex and Sex with Sin: The Anthropology of James 1:12-15,” *HTR* 95 (2002), 159, having described Philo’s philosophical framework for desire and death as contrary to reason and life, observes that “In contrast to Philo, ἐπιθυμία here designates not an irrational passion but a person’s willingness to sin against God.” He notes later that James’ rhetorical diatribe is concerned with “the problem of self-deceit,” unsurprising since “a conventional aim of the diatribe was the indictment of moral inconsistency” (160, f.n. 74).

God, we allow our sinful natures to lead us on the path of death.²⁶ In a book concerned with singleness versus duplicity,²⁷ to allow our desires free reign is a sign of the double-souled, those who do not give wholehearted allegiance to God but allow their desires to control them to the point of their own death.²⁸ It may fairly be asked here whether the “death” to which James refers in 1:15 is spiritual and eternal or merely physical,²⁹ but this death stands as the contrasting outcome to those who have received the “crown of life” in 1:12.³⁰ One can either allow God to control one’s actions, thereby enduring temptation and receiving the “crown which is life”—i.e., eternal life—or one can dabble in temptation and allow it to control one, at which point the individual has willingly chosen to leave the path of wisdom, choosing instead the path that leads to spiritual death.³¹

Instead of that trajectory, however, James points to the alternative path and the one who should, by rights, direct our path. He begins in verse 16 with the direct warning, “do not be deceived.” A better translation, however, should probably take the middle voice on account of the context: “do not deceive yourselves!”³² This warning may reflect back on the preceding passage (especially v. 13), echoing

²⁶ Matt Jackson-McCabe, *Logos & law in the Letter of James: the law of nature, the law of Moses, & the law of freedom* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 196, concludes that James falls in the “two ways” category of wisdom literature, in which desires and the *logos* function as part of a cosmic battle vying “to influence human behavior” before the looming “judgment by the divine lawgiver.” He fails to account, however, for the impression the text gives wherein the desires are innate but the *logos* is a divine gift to the “firstfruit,” not something native to all humanity.

²⁷ Moo, *James*, 59, states, “Arguably the most important theme in James is his concern that Christians display spiritual integrity: singleness of intent combined with blamelessness in actions.”

²⁸ Johnson, *James*, 204, notes that 4:1-14 and 5:1-6 show how distorted desires lead to the death of others.

²⁹ The term θάνατος does not clarify this debate as it can refer to either.

³⁰ Martin, *James*, 37, observes that “death” as the end result opposes the “life” won in 1:12.

³¹ Moo, *James*, 76, reminds his readers of the wisdom background in Proverbs in this picture: “For the image of ‘desire’ as seductress luring the believer into an adulterous union that brings death is reminiscent of the role played by the ‘loose woman’ in Proverbs 5-9. This figure, who leads her guests into the depths of Sheol (Prov. 9:18), is contrasted with wisdom, who gives life to those who embrace her (Prov. 8:35). Since James has mentioned wisdom in v. 5, it may be that he has this OT imagery in mind as he contrasts the life given to those who endure trials (v. 12) with the death produced in those who allow desire to run its course (v. 15).” Ben Witherington, III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007), 434, agrees: “We see here in these two parallel sentences [1:12; 1:15] the two opposite ways a person can go—either trial, approval and life or desire, sin and death, with no middle ground.”

³² Μὴ πλανᾶσθε. The verb is in the middle passive. Cf. Jer. 17:9, “the heart is deceitful above all things.” Nystrom (*James*, 83) notes that James “knows we possess a tremendous capacity to fool ourselves and to believe certain things simply because we wish to believe them.”

the warning not to blame God wrongfully for our own willful choices, but it also points forward as a reflection on the immediately following passage as a warning not to underestimate God’s redeeming work.³³

B. God’s generosity specifically in redeeming his people

James 1:17-18 may be the most triumphant statement in James of God’s role in redeeming his people. It begins with a reiteration of the lesson we learned in 1:5 of God’s generosity. The author uses a redundant statement to emphasize this: “every good gift and every perfect giving comes down from above, from the father of lights.”³⁴ In contrast to the desire, sin, and death that bog down the previous verses, we now find that God is the source of every good thing that comes into our lives. As before with the double-minded, James does not want his audience confused about what does and does not come from God. God is the source of manifold good, not evil. We can be assured that he will not change in regards to this because “in him there is no variation or shadow of turning.”³⁵ Unlike the planets that turn and shade and change, in God we find only consistency.³⁶ Indeed he is supreme over all that changes in the universe. As Garland describes it, “God’s goodness . . . is not as periodic as the full moon or the morning sunrise. It does not fade into the west.”³⁷ With the bold statement of 1:17 James again affirms God’s unchanging nature as the generous giver of all that is good.

He uses that confidence, then, as the background for his affirmation of 1:18: “Because he was willing, he gave birth to us by

³³ Marie E. Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Geo.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 189, observes, “‘Do not be deceived’ is a formula used to introduce a well known maxim (cf. 1 Cor 15:55; Gal 6:17), and underlines the conventional character of the teaching of James.” She links this warning with vv. 17-19a, such that “the assurance” of God’s good character “begins and ends with an appeal to commonly accepted tradition.”

³⁴ Πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δῶρημα τέλειον ἄνωθεν ἔστιν καταβαῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν φώτων. See Donald J. Verseput, “James 1:17 and the Jewish Morning Prayers,” *NovT* 39 (1997), 177-91, for a very plausible background for this description of God as the “Father of lights” within Jewish prayers said each morning to thank God for his faithfulness in bringing the new day and his mercy evidenced thereby.

³⁵ . . . παρ’ ᾧ οὐκ ἔνι παραλλαγῇ ἢ τροπῆς ἀποσκίασμα.

³⁶ Martin, *James*, 39, notes that this description stands in contrast to the shifting planets, for “while they are always in motion he never changes whether in himself . . . or in his dealings with his people (so 1:5).”

³⁷ David E. Garland, “Severe Trials, Good Gifts, and Pure Religion: James 1,” *RevExp* 83 (1986), 392.

the word of truth in order that we might become a sort of firstfruits of his creation.”³⁸ This verse states most boldly James’ theology of God’s initiatory work in electing and redeeming his people.³⁹ As with Abraham and the people of Israel, the process of becoming part of the people of God is initiated and brought into being by God himself. This verse does not only state God’s willingness, as if he merely acquiesced to such an event, but that God actually *willed* the new creation into being. Subsequently, the idea that he “gave birth” to these people indicates a new nature: they are no longer trapped by their fallen natures—which can only “give birth” to death—but have been re-created by the word and brought into the new covenant.⁴⁰ The precise nature of the “word of truth” is uncertain,⁴¹ but the flow of the text clearly links the *logos* with the law in 1:22-25 declares it

³⁸ βουληθεῖς ἀπεκύησεν ἡμᾶς λόγῳ ἀληθείας εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἀπαρχὴν τινα τῶν αὐτοῦ κτισμάτων. The initial participle may be more simply translated as “being willing,” but it makes sense also as a causal participle since the rebirth would not have occurred without his active will of it.

³⁹ While the vast majority of scholars view this as a reference to redemption and new birth, L. E. Elliott-Binns, “James i.18: Creation or Redemption?,” *NTS* 3 (1956), 148-61, views this as a reference “to the original creation of which man was the crown and the promise; [James] knows nothing of any ‘new’ creation or rebirth” (156). Others who hold that this “birth” is original creation include Hort, *Epistle of St James*, 31-32; Spitta, *Zur Geschichte*, 45-46; Martin Klein, “*Ein vollkommenes Werk*”: *Vollkommenheit, Gesetz und Gericht als theologische Themen des Jakobusbriefes*, BWANT 139 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995), 129-34; Jackson-McCabe, *Logos and Law*; and somewhat tentatively, Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 77-78. In response to this position, Ropes, *Epistle of St. James*, 166, observes, “the figure of begetting was not used for creation, whereas it came early into use with reference to the Christians, who deemed themselves ‘sons of God.’” This interpretation of rebirth and regeneration has the broader support: cf. Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 53-54; Dibelius, *James*, 104-7; Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James*, 190; J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1897), 57-58; Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 76-77; Franz Mußner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1975), 94-95; Davids, *Epistle of James*, 89-90

⁴⁰ James’ use of “a kind/sort of” (τινᾶ) may well speak to the “already/not yet” nature of this new birth. The believers have been reborn, but they still apparently are struggling with obedience, something that Jeremiah 31:31-34 does not anticipate.

⁴¹ The term λόγος ἀληθείας has a variety of potential meanings: 1) Some interpret it simply as the Gospel message (cf. Johnson, *James*, 202; James B. Adamson, *James: The Man and His Message* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 78), or 2) as Jesus’ teaching more specifically (cf. Peter H. Davids, “James and Jesus,” in *Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. David Wenham [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985], 71, and Davids, *Epistle of James*, 95; Martin, *James*, 49; Dibelius, *James*, 113). 3) A few interpret this as a Christianized understanding of the Stoic λόγος σπερματικός (cf. Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 83; St. John Parry, *A Discussion of the General Epistle of St James* [London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1903], 145; Hort, *Epistle of St James*, 38; Jackson-McCabe, *Logos and Law*, 138. Other options include 4) Wisdom (cf. Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, Sacra Pagina [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003], 79-80; Timothy B. Cargal, *Restoring the Diaspora: Discursive Structure and Purpose in the Epistle of James*, SBLDS 114 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993], 90; R. W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* [Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997], 73); 5) the Mosaic Law (cf. Ropes, *Epistle of St. James*, 173; A. Schlatter, *Der Brief Des Jakobus* [Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1956], 146); and finally, 6) Jeremiah’s promised New Covenant (cf. Bauckham, *James*, 141; Moo, *James*, 32).

something not only given (1:18) and implanted (1:21) but also needing to be received (1:21) and obeyed (1:22).⁴²

Becoming a firstfruit indicates both something dedicated to the Lord (cf. Ex. 23:19; 34:26), and also something set apart from the rest.⁴³ If the epistle was intended for a Jewish-Christian audience, this could well be an affirmation of their unique status within their Jewish surroundings. Regardless of their background, though, these people are uniquely chosen for Christ's service by God's will. The firstfruits originally were intended to feed the priests and priestly families and as such these offerings were dedicated *for a purpose*. James would see no difference with these firstfruits: having been chosen and the word placed on their hearts (1:21), they now needed to remove evil from amongst them and in each one and start living according to God's purpose for them. It is important, however, to begin always from the starting point of God's redeeming work before moving to the "faith and works" debate, else one concludes too quickly that "Faith perfected through deeds is the only way to salvation, neither faith alone nor deeds alone can have the desired effect," and "Salvation for James is a corporate and public expression of faith within the Jacobean community, and nothing else."⁴⁴ While James himself states that "faith without works cannot save," that is not his starting point but rather that believers have been recreated *by God's grace* and so need to live accordingly.

C. Humans Are Called to Imitate God's Character

One might then ask what that purpose is. Essentially, James sees those who have been reborn as called into the image of God,

⁴² James has several purposes for the λόγος: by it the people were (re)born (1:18), it was implanted in them in this rebirth process but they still need to somehow "receive" it (1:21), but ultimately it then requires active obedience (1:22-24). Without obedience, the receiving is questioned, the implanting made moot, thus calling into question the very re-birth process itself. Likewise, within the hearing/obeying pericope of 1:22-25, James then makes the smooth transition from λόγος to "law" (νόμος), which then carries the discussion onward into chapter 2. The link between the λόγος and νόμος, however, cannot be discounted and so requires some recognition of that when discussing the meaning of the "word of truth" here in 1:18. Because of this link between the terms, I agree with Bauckham and Moo regarding the identity of the λόγος as the promised New Covenant—both the word of grace and the guiding law.

⁴³ See Kistemaker, *Epistle of James*, 54 for a further discussion on the significance of the believers' identity as "firstfruits."

⁴⁴ Botha, "Jacobean Soteriology," 406, 405.

reflecting onwards what God has modeled for his people. James 1:27 forms the culmination of this introductory section of the letter, finishing the move from God’s action to human response and telling the audience *exactly* what God expects from them. There are two pieces to the description of the “pure and undefiled religion”⁴⁵ that God desires from his people: “to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”⁴⁶ These two aspects of our calling restate aspects of what has been discussed above regarding God’s own character.

One area that James hammered home within the first chapter was the idea of God as *generous* by his very nature. It is utterly unsurprising, then, that he expects his audience to exercise generosity as well. James 1:27 is the first statement to command human generosity, here pictured as visiting those who are unfortunate and helpless. That act of self-abasement, of visiting the least ones of society, is pictured as one half of pure religion. By visiting them, the intimation is that the believer also *helps* them in their difficulty, whether by bringing food or by working to change the social structures that leave them “in distress.”⁴⁷ As 1:9-11 depicted, the “humble” will be elevated while those who view themselves as superior will be brought low, so it is to every person’s advantage to identify themselves with the humble!⁴⁸ Besides mere pragmatics, however, the underlying principle of identifying with the helpless of society and choosing to be seen with them mirrors God’s willingness

⁴⁵ ἡ ἁγία καὶ ἀκατάρακτος καὶ ἀμιαντος. “Religion” in 1:26 has the negative connotation that modern culture often associates with the term, but that is made clear by its link with “seems” (*dokei*=). In 1:27, James seeks to define true religion to his audience, here using the term simply in its basic meaning of devotion to God “as it expresses itself in cultic rites” (BDAG, 459). R. W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997), 100, however, notes that this is “a comprehensive term for the community’s ethical performance rather than its cultic practice. This makes sense of James if the normative role of the biblical Torah is to guide the performance of the sacred community within a profane world.”

⁴⁶ ἐπισκέπτεσθαι ὀρφανούς καὶ χήρας ἐν τῇ θλίψει αὐτῶν, ἅσπιλον ἑαυτὸν τηρεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου.

⁴⁷ Martin, *James*, 55, calls this a “summons to do what lies in [the readers’] power: to come to the aid of the defenseless members of society and reach out actively on their behalf (1:27). Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 101, warns that “even conventional social wisdom instructs that a group is as viable as its weakest member (cf. Matt. 18:6-14; Acts 6:1-10). For this reason, the biblical Torah is especially concerned that the least and last members of the community are not abused but cared for (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 24:17-21; cf. Ps. 146:9; Isa. 1:17; et al.), since God is their champion (Deut. 10:18),” and that by acting thus, one “anticipates the inevitable reversal.”

⁴⁸ Kamell, “The Economics of Humility: The Rich and the Humble in James,” forthcoming.

to choose and identify with the believers and so evidences that one has been transformed by God's work.

While identifying (or failing to) with the poor can be seen quite clearly in 2:1-6, the passage that most clearly shows the requirement of being transformed into a generous lifestyle is 2:14-17. This passage is (in)famous for its discussion of “faith and works,” but as such is highly relevant to the question of salvation and eternal security. James asks: “What use is it, my siblings, if someone should say [that] they have faith but they do not have works? Is faith able to save them?”⁴⁹ James makes it very clear to his audience that verse 14 refers to eschatological salvation, not an initial calling.⁵⁰ The ones addressed are “brothers (and sisters)” (ἀδελφοί), so he refers to those who are already among the community, those who have been born by the word of truth and thereby had the word implanted within their very hearts. But a person who fails to *obey* the word of truth (cf. 1:22-25) shows that they possess a faith useless for salvation. James 1:22 already stated the principle that only hearing the word and not obeying it leads only to self-deception, and this passage that explores

⁴⁹ Τί τὸ ὄφελος, ἀδελφοί μου, ἐὰν πίστιν λέγη τις ἔχειν ἔργα δὲ μὴ ἔχη; μὴ δύναται ἡ πίστις σώσαι αὐτόν; It continues: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacking their daily food and someone of you should say to them: “Go in peace, be warmed and fed,” but you do not give to them anything useful for the body, what use is it? In the same way also faith, if it has not works, is dead in itself”; ἐὰν ἀδελφὸς ἢ ἀδελφὴ γυμνοὶ ὑπάρχωσιν καὶ λειπόμενοι τῆς ἐφημέρου τροφῆς. εἴπη δὲ τις αὐτοῖς ἐξ ὑμῶν ὑπάγετε ἐν εἰρήνῃ, θερμαίνεσθε καὶ χορτάζεσθε, μὴ δώτε δὲ αὐτοῖς τὰ ἐπιτήδεια τοῦ σώματος, τί τὸ ὄφελος; οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχη ἔργα, νεκρά ἐστὶν καθ' ἑαυτήν. The verbs of the “blessing”—θερμαίνεσθε καὶ χορτάζεσθε—may be either in the middle or the passive. The middle voice adds the insult of telling this person who lacks every necessity to go and take care of their own needs, while the passive voice denies that the well-wisher might have been the person by whom God intended to feed and care for the destitute one. Meanwhile, the person in need is described specifically as “a brother *or sister*” (the one example of purposeful gender inclusivity), as James hammers home that these are both men and woman and are *within the believing community*. While he might expect the followers of Christ to care for whomever of the poor cross their path, the failure of the community to care for their own creates a worse indictment.

⁵⁰ The term σωζῶ appears 5 times in the epistle, four of which refer to an eschatological reality (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20) and only one to physical healing (5:15). Here in 2:14, this eschatological nature is evident particularly from the context of judgment from verse 13. Mayor, *St. James*, 89, defines σωζῶ here as “the triumph of mercy over judgment of ver. 13.” Johnson, *James*, 238, notes the answer to the question whether “such faith is able to save that one” comes from the context of chapter 1 as well: “It is the ‘word of truth’ implanted by God that is ‘able to save their souls’ (1:18), but only, as 1:22-25 argues, if they are ‘doers of the word and not hearers only.’” Ronald Y. K. Fung, “‘Justification’ in the Epistle of James,” in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 147, adds that grammatically, “The two rhetorical questions [of v. 14] make it plain that ‘such faith’ yields no profit (cf. RSV) for the man who possesses it: it cannot save him from the final judgment (cf. 13).” Cf. also Martin, *James*, 81.

further and concludes that the self-deception is deadly to the one so engaged.

It seems important that the action chosen here to exemplify living, saving faith is one which models the very nature of God. The person who acts mercifully toward the helpless of society have internalized God's long-stated concern for the widows and orphans (cf. Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:19; 24:17, 19; 27:19; Ps. 146:9; etc.) and so acts as God himself acts. By failing to care for this brother or sister in dire need—instead passing them off with vague well-wishes—this person reveals that the generous nature of God has not permeated their own and that they have not been transformed into his likeness as described in 1:5 and 1:17.⁵¹ God gives to anyone who asks “generously and without hesitation,” but here there is no attempt at similar action, leading James to reiterate his query, “what use is it?” A faith that shows no attempt at transformation is declared “dead,” “useless.”⁵²

What is remarkable, though, is that it is specifically *because* of God's generous nature that the condemnation is so harsh. If the believer had asked God for wisdom in how to act, God would have given it to them freely, thus guiding them to the proper generous behavior!⁵³ But because their faith is limited to their own comfort and does not see beyond that, because they judge others by their appearances and not by God's standards (2:1-7) and have never learned to partake in God's generosity, they end up judged as having a “useless” faith.⁵⁴ Those who have been re-born by God must show

⁵¹ Wesley Hiram Wachob, *The voice of Jesus in the social rhetoric of James*, SNTSMS 106 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 88, observes, “the ‘faith of our glorious/honorable Lord Jesus Christ’ is incompatible with acts that *dishonor* the poor whom God has chosen.”

⁵² Kerry Lee Lewis, “A New Perspective on James 2:14-26,” (paper presented at ETS, Providence, Nov. 19 2008), 13, understands this differently than most when he posits, “The epithet ‘dead’ should not be understood as an ontological comment on the nature of faith. Rather it is a metaphorical label applied for a rhetorical purpose. James seeks to shock his readers into realizing that faith without works is ‘useless,’ as the more literal epithet of 2:20 demonstrates.” This fits with his somewhat controversial understanding of “faith” and “works” as separate entities that are both required for salvation.

⁵³ Bauckham, *James*, 181, rightly notes this connection: God's “giving is single-minded and wholehearted (1:5; ὁπλῶς), just as people's response should be. What God gives are ‘perfect gifts’ (1:17), especially the perfect or complete law (1:25) and complete wisdom (3:17; cf. 1:5), the two gifts which make possible the wholeness of human life lived according to God's complete law and informed by the complete wisdom from above.”

⁵⁴ Regarding the crucial verb δικαιόω in verse 21, Fung, “‘Justification’ in the Epistle of James,” 152-54, offers four interpretations of the verb: 1) equivalent to “save” in v. 14; 2) initial declaration of [Footnote continued on next page ...]

evidence of this rebirth in their character by reflecting the nature of their generous Father who specifically has chosen to identify himself with the poor (2:5).

Reflecting God’s character also leads to the second area specified in 1:27: moral purity. Purity is a broader category that includes speech, economics, prayer, and wisdom, and is defined in contrast to the doubleminded. “Purity” as a category may well cover nearly all of the commands in James. For instance, it is a request for wisdom *unmixed by doubt* that receives God’s gracious response in 1:5-8. To be called “doubleminded” (δίψυχος) is one of the worst things that James can term a person, for that person’s loyalties are multiple and divided, not given to God alone who deserves one’s loyalty.⁵⁵ To be “doubleminded” stands against God’s nature as the “singleminded” (ἄπλωσ) giver and reveals that one is still tempted and led astray by wrongful desires, “unstable in all one’s ways” (1:8).

James 1:21 gives a graphic illustration of the demand for purity: “Therefore put off all impurity and every sort of evil in humility (and) receive the implanted word which has the power to save your souls.”⁵⁶ The implanted word (recalling the “word of truth” from 1:18) is set in contrast with all impurity and the moral filth that taints a person’s soul.⁵⁷ Anything that corrupts the wholistic purity of a person is to be put away, taken off much like a filthy garment. The word of truth does not abide alongside evil desires. “Receiving the word,” meanwhile, entails not merely “listening” to it but obeying it (1:22-25).⁵⁸ Those classed as “hearers” are equated to those who “deceive

righteousness; 3) ultimate declaration of righteousness; 4) a “general, *demonstrative* sense of being vindicated, proved or shown to be just.”

⁵⁵ See Darian Lockett, “‘Unstained by the World’: Purity and Pollution as an Indicator of Cultural Interaction in the Letter of James,” in *Reading James with New Eyes: Methodological Reassessments of the Letter of James*, ed. Robert L. Webb, and John S. Kloppenborg (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 49-74; more extensively, Darian Lockett, *Purity and Worldview in the Epistle of James* (London: T&T Clark, 2008). See Stanley E. Porter, “Is *dipsuchos* [James 1,8; 4,8] a ‘Christian’ Word?,” *Biblica* 71 (1990), 469-98, for further reflections on the origin of this term.

⁵⁶ διὸ ἀποθέμενοι πᾶσαν ῥυπαρίαν καὶ περισσεΐαν κακίας ἐν πραύτητι, δεξασθε τὸν ἔμφυτον λόγον τὸν δυνάμενον σῶσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν. The phrase “in humility” (ἐν πραύτητι) most likely functions as a pivot, modifying both commands to “put off” and “receive.” Both sides of the equation ought to be done in humility.

⁵⁷ Martin, *James*, 48, translates this as “the abundance/excess of wickedness” making this whole phrase a “tautologous expression to sum up the complete moral renovation James is calling for.”

⁵⁸ The interpretation of “implanted” (ἔμφυτος) is uncertain, with some seeing it as “innate” from creation (e.g., Jackson-McCabe, *Logos and Law*, 196; Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Black’s NTC [London: A. & C. Black, 1980], 83), and others seeing as an implanting that [Footnote continued on next page ...]

themselves” (1:22), this self-deception again a strong warning to the audience.⁵⁹ Ropes summarizes this self-deception as “the notion that hearing is sufficient.”⁶⁰ Davids is one of the few commentators who deals more thoroughly with the notion of self-deception in this context, observing that the term for “deception” “occurs elsewhere in the NT only in Col. 2:4, where it means to lead one astray from the faith. Here it must mean to deceive oneself as to one’s salvation.”⁶¹ Given the force of James’ argument in 2:14-26, with his repeated question “what use is it” (2:14, 16) and his rhetoric that faith *must* have works with it to be effective for salvation (set up by the question, “is such faith able to save that one?” in 2:14), it does seem that James at the least argues that obedience to the word as introduced in 1:22 is essential for salvation. It is important to note, however, that these people are deceiving *themselves*. There is nothing in the word that is deceptive: their own choice to persist in self-deception places them outside the salvific power of the λόγος.

While some have seen the two injunctions of 1:27 as contradictory,⁶² they actually supplement each other in calling people to the wholistic life of remembering the poor and retaining moral purity. In 1:26, James warns his readers that controlling one’s tongue

happens at the (re)birth of 1:18 (e.g., Johnson, *James*, 202; St. John Parry, *A Discussion of the General Epistle of St James* [London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1903], 22). This author opts for understanding the “implanting” as a reference to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34, thus done at the time of the “birth” in 1:18 (see Bauckham, *James*, 141).

⁵⁹ παραλογιζόμενοι ἑαυτούς. Louw and Nida define this verb as “to deceive by arguments or false reasons,” thus entering these warnings among other cautions against careless and sinful speech in James.

⁶⁰ J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916), 175. He gives as comparative texts Gal. 6:3, Matt. 7:21-24, and Rom. 2:17-25.

⁶¹ Davids, *Epistle of James*, 97. He concludes this with M. Dibelius, *James*, trans. Michael A. Williams, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 114, who comments “Merely hearing is equivalent to self-deception so long as one believes that even then the word can still ‘save.’” Franz Mußner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1975), 105, in contrast, sees the deception as relating to piety and not salvation: “Diese ‚täuschen sich selbst‘ (παραλογίζεσθαι), nicht hinsichtlich der Rettung ihrer Seelen (so Dibelius), sondern über das Wesen wahrer Frömmigkeit.”

⁶² See David J. Roberts, “The Definition of ‘Pure Religion’ in James 1²⁷,” *Expository Times* 83 (1972), 215-16, and more recently Paul Trudinger, “The Epistle of James: Down-to-Earth and Otherworldly?,” *Downside Review* 122 (2004), 61-63. The response of Bruce C. Johanson, “The Definition of ‘Pure Religion’ in James 1²⁷ Reconsidered,” *Expository Times* 84 (1973), 118-19, however, suffices for both attempts to make this claim. See also Lockett, *Purity and Worldview*, 187-88, who notes in contrast to Roberts and Trudinger that “the composition is not calling for sectarian separation from the surrounding culture, but rather . . . is a complex document demonstrating a degree of cultural accommodation while at the same time calling forth specific socio-cultural boundaries between the reader and the world.”

is necessary for pleasing God, then continues with the double command for social justice and moral purity. This second part demonstrates God’s antipathy for the worship of his people being mixed and tainted by the wrongful moral entity called the “world” (κόσμος). This κόσμος stands in direct opposition to the ways of God, luring people into moral laxity and divided allegiance. Lockett states “here that James understands κόσμος with the nuance of the sinful world-system that ‘stains’ or ‘defiles’ the body . . . more than the material world or humanity in general; it is the entire cultural value system or world order which is hostile toward what James frames as the divine value system.”⁶³ God desires his people to strive toward simplicity and purity in their worship rather than their divided loyalties and love of the things the world loves (wealth: 2:1-6; 5:1-6; power: 4:1-10; anger: 1:19-20; 3:14-16).

Chapter three is also a discussion on purity—this time of speech—bringing back the concern of 1:26 and the “worthless” religion there. James here argues vehemently against the mentality that sinful speech and pure worship of God can co-exist. Sinlessness in speech, he recognizes, is impossible: “For we all fail many times. If someone does not fail in their speech, this one is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body” (3:2).⁶⁴ The “perfect man” continues the theme of “perfection” begun in 1:4 that relates to maturity and completion.⁶⁵ Perfection in this area is unattainable, as verse two acknowledges, but that does not mean it ought not be striven for! In fact, James finds the dichotomy in people’s speech ridiculous and reminds his readers that to speak cruelly of another person is to deny the image of God in which they are made (3:9). Ultimately, in the contrast of wisdoms, the earthly, demonic wisdom is characterized by envy and ambition, while the primary characteristic of godly wisdom is *purity*.⁶⁶ Out of this purity all the other traits of divine wisdom then flow. As Davids describes, “This purity, then, means that the person

⁶³ Lockett, *Purity and Worldview*, 117.

⁶⁴ πολλά γὰρ πταίμεν ἅπαντες. εἴ τις ἐν λόγῳ οὐ πταίει, οὗτος τέλειος ἀνὴρ δυνατὸς χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ ὅλον τὸ σῶμα.

⁶⁵ See Martin, *James*, 109, who notes that the idea here is “of completeness and maturity, not sinlessness,” but that “more than intemperate speech seems in view here; it is the unrestrained use of the tongue to lead others away from the truth that is condemned.” Cf. Matt. 18:6, par. Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2.

⁶⁶ ἐπίγειος, δαιμονιώδης – the non-wisdom contrasts with a wisdom described as “from above” (ἡ ἄνωθεν σοφία) and is “first pure” (πρῶτον μὲν ἀγνή).

partakes of a characteristic of God: he follows God’s moral directives with unmixed motives. This person serves God alone.”⁶⁷ The believer strives for moral purity, then, but also for purity of attachment to and focus on God alone.

One last example of James’ demand for purity involves the other use of James’ term “doubleminded.” In James 4:4-10, James begins by calling his audience “adulteresses” (4:4) in an echo of OT prophetic language (particularly Hosea). This insult comes in reference to their “friendship with the world,”⁶⁸ again seeing the taint of the world’s moral order. He continues by calling them to cleanse and purify themselves of this “doublemindedness” (4:8), now using ritual language of purification. The use of his term δίψυχος, however, makes clear that James is not signifying ritual purity but rather moral purity, the taint of being double-souled, double-willed, unstable in devotion to God (cf. 1:6-8). They need to repent from being “friends with the world” and thereby “enemies of God.” Purity of devotion to God *in thought and action* is not negotiable in God’s schema: humility and singleminded friendship with God are essential to godly worship of the holy God (cf. Lev. 11:44-45).

The one area in which James explicitly states that we are *not* to mimic God is as judge. James pronounces in 4:12: “There is one lawgiver and one judge who is able to save and to destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor?”⁶⁹ The role of judge, whether in discriminating between the rich and poor as in 2:1-9 (where they are called “judges with evil thoughts”) or in slandering as in 4:11-12 and complaining in 5:9, places judgment upon another person and is described as a sinful attempt to usurp God’s unique role. Part of the reason that judging causes a person to sin is that we fail to imitate God’s standards for judgment (2:5), but also because judgment

⁶⁷ Davids, *Epistle of James*, 154. He notes that “Moral purity is expanded by means of a list of adjectives,” viewing the rest of the list as a commentary on purity.

⁶⁸ ἡ φιλία τοῦ κόσμου. Lockett, *Purity and Worldview*, 117 comments: “To be a friend of the world is to live in harmony with the values and logic of the world in the context of James 4.1-10, namely envy, rivalry, competition, and murder. Friendship language is the language of alliance or coalition and here in 4.4 those allying themselves with ‘the world’ are labeled ‘adulteresses’, or those unfaithful to covenant relationship. These references to ‘the world’ in James refer to something more than the material world or humanity in general; it is the entire cultural value system or world order which is hostile toward what James frames as the divine value system.”

⁶⁹ εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ νομοθέτης καὶ κριτὴς ὁ δυνάμενος σῶσαι καὶ ἀπολέσαι· σὺ δὲ τίς εἶ ὁ κρίνων τὸν πλησίον;

belongs in the hands of the one who created both the standard for judgment (the word/law) and whose judgments matter (“able to save or destroy” eschatologically).

D. God as the Merciful and Sole Judge

James has a fair amount to say about God’s role as judge. The understanding of God’s role, however, is both carefully nuanced and essential to ultimately understanding James’ theology of salvation. For one, judgments about other people, whether concerning their value or their righteousness, are to be done solely by God and this judgment occurs at the end of a person’s life. Ultimately, judgment appears to be based on how a person has lived after receiving the new birth and the “implanted word,” but apparently the weight of judgment falls on the side of mercy rather than strict justice.

Regarding God’s sole right to judge, we can see this first in James 2:1-9. The people were faultily discriminating between the wealthy and the poor, and as such revealed themselves to be “judges with evil thoughts” (2:4).⁷⁰ Here is the fundamental problem with human judgment: we cannot do it correctly. As with Samuel and the sons of Jesse (1 Sam. 16:5-13), God has different criterion for judgment. James 2:5 immediately follows this condemnation with the revelation that God has chosen the *poor*, not the wealthy. This probably does involve the physically destitute,⁷¹ but also those who do not have the social acceptance of the world (κόσμος, see above). The key attribute of these “poor,” however, is the qualification that they are the ones “loving” God.⁷² While God is entirely on the side of justice for the poor, the poor are not heirs of the kingdom indiscriminately, but heirs of the kingdom that God has promised *to those who love him*. There may be an echo of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 regarding the difficulty of the rich person in entering the

⁷⁰ κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, Reprint ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004); Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead*, Rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2002). David Hutchinson Edgar, *Has God Not Chosen the Poor? The Social Setting of the Epistle of James*, JSNTSS 206 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 120, deems the poor person one of “the radical itinerant prophets of the early Christian movement . . . [a] socially marginal poor person,” but this identification seems strained.

⁷² τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν.

kingdom here or to the beatitude on the poor in Matthew 5:3.⁷³ Regardless, the discrimination being practiced shows that the church has failed to appropriate Jesus' criterion for "Blessed are the poor," preferring instead the world's shallow wealth-based criterion for judgment, thereby failing to appropriate and enact God's true value-system in their judgments.

Likewise, the condemnation in 4:11-12 stems from their slander against one another within the community itself. Speech of this nature reveals yet again the arrogance of those who judge because they place themselves not only above their peers, but in truth act as superior to the law. James' logic follows thus: "whoever speaks against their brother or judges their brother speaks against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge,"⁷⁴ putting them in direct contradiction of 1:25. From this follows the warning that there is only *one* judge and *one* lawgiver, namely, God. People who slander others forget the law of love (see 2:8) that forbids this sort of action and thereby set themselves in opposition to the law by choosing when and how to obey.⁷⁵ Believers should not discriminate against, slander, or judge each other,⁷⁶ when they do they sin and are *judges*, no longer *doers*, of the law (cf. 1:22-25).

James 5:9 re-issues this warning, cautioning the people against grumbling against each other because such actions not only cause one to sin (as in 4:11-12) but actually place one in danger of being judged oneself.⁷⁷ The danger is quite close, according to James: "the judge is

⁷³ Deppe, *Sayings of Jesus*, 90-91, however, after surveying the evidence concludes that "James does not stand in the tradition of either Matthew or Luke" in the beatitudes regarding the economically poor or the poor in spirit, but that this is rather "a combination of the church's experience with a promise of Jesus" (91).

⁷⁴ ὁ καταλαλῶν ἀδελφοῦ ἢ κρίνων τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ καταλαλεῖ νόμου καὶ κρίνει νόμον· εἰ δὲ νόμον κρίνεις, οὐκ εἶ ποιητῆς νόμου ἀλλὰ κριτῆς.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *James*, 293.

⁷⁶ This is in terms of judgment concerning someone's salvation or personal value. People elected to the position of judge have an entire set of rules to follow concerning just judgment and are not the concern of the epistle.

⁷⁷ Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 258 cautions that "at day's end, to 'complain about another' reflects the same self-centered worldview as does withholding mercy from the poor (2:1-7), of slandering another teacher (3:9-16), or the exploitation of others in securing wealth for oneself (5:1-6). These are all foolish acts since they fail to act in light of God's coming triumph. Against this peril of great price, then, the exhortation to endure bids the community to act patiently toward others rather to complain about them."

standing at the door!”⁷⁸ This present-eschatological threat is quite serious: to be caught judging another person can lead to one’s own condemnation by the One who has both the right to judge (called ὁ κριτής; 5:9) and the power of judgment (“able to save and destroy”; 4:12).⁷⁹ While the abuse of power and even the prideful assessment of one’s own power over the future both lead to condemnation (4:13-5:6), the sin of judging and discriminating between people also consistently leads to warnings of one’s own judgment.

This warning, however, most likely stems from humanity’s failure to judge as *mercifully* as God. James 2:11-12 is perhaps the most important pericope for this theory. In 2:10-11, the author sets up the perfection of obedience required: it is all-or-nothing.⁸⁰ The law is not an object to be divided, discussed, and decided upon: it is one entity given by the one Lawgiver, a unified, untainted whole.⁸¹ He uses this reality to warn the audience away from the hubris of discrimination, but he follows it with the reality of the coming judgment, urging them: “So speak and so act as those about to be judged according to the law of freedom” (2:12).⁸² The “law” as it appears in 2:10-11 may seem oppressive rather than freeing, but I do not think he envisages two different laws in this passage.⁸³ Rather, because James views the law as reflecting the will of the Creator and Redeemer who gives only good gifts (1:17), when seen rightly as the indivisible whole of God’s will for his creation, it is actually the “law of freedom” rather than merely a list of commands. Those who obey the “implanted word” (1:21, 22-25) will not find it oppressive because

⁷⁸ ὁ κριτής πρὸ τῶν θυρῶν ἕστηκεν.

⁷⁹ Immediately following this in 5:12 we see yet another cause for condemnation, this time for false speech, in what is perhaps the most direct echo of a Jesus saying in Matt 5:33-37. See Deppe, *Sayings of Jesus*, 134-47, for a discussion of the issues regarding this saying.

⁸⁰ Bauckham, *James*, 143 notes that “James here emphasizes it as a whole. One cannot pick and choose which commandments to obey (2:10-11), as though one could disregard the prohibition of partiality (Lev. 19:5) while obeying the commandment to love one’s neighbor (2:8-9). But it is *as summarized in the love commandment* that the law is a whole. Partiality, like adultery and murder (2:9, 11), is one form of refusing to love one’s neighbour.”

⁸¹ As Johnson, *James*, 232, describes it: “Critical to the argument is that the commandment is not just a text but ‘someone speaking.’”

⁸² Οὕτως λαλεῖτε καὶ οὕτως ποιεῖτε ὡς διὰ νόμου ἐλευθερίας μέλλοντες κρίνεσθαι.

⁸³ Cf. Moo, *James*, 116, who affirms that “with these commands, James returns to the dominant theme of this section of the letter: the need for believers to validate the reality of their ‘religion’ by ‘doing’ the word (1:22).”

they have been given the knowledge and power of how to act.⁸⁴ James 2:12 is still a legitimate warning, though: while this is a “law of freedom” by which they are to be judged, their speech and their actions *are still to be judged*.⁸⁵ Both realities of the freedom and the judgment are in play at the same time. Simply because it is the “law of freedom” does not mean they have license to behave however they might like. This is God’s standard for their actions, a standard pictured in James variously as the “word” that saves and the “law” by which we are judged, together requiring obedience.

James expands the reality of the judgment further in 2:13: “For judgment will be without mercy to the one not acting mercifully. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”⁸⁶ This is where an understanding of the elliptical nature of wisdom writing is most essential: that last phrase, with so little ado, summarizes James’ view of God’s judgment. Human acts of mercy are essential to attaining God’s mercy in the eschatological judgment.⁸⁷ In a sense it is merely the positive restatement of 2:13a, now reworking Jesus’ beatitude in Matthew 5:7: “Blessed are the merciful, because they shall be shown mercy.”⁸⁸ James does not quantify the amount of mercy, but he mandates mercy.⁸⁹ It is not about tallying up a certain number of

⁸⁴ See again Bauckham, *James*, 181, cited above.

⁸⁵ Moo, *James*, 116-17, continues, “a new twist is added here. For the first time, James warns about eschatological judgment and suggests that conformity to the demands of the law will be the criterion of that judgment. . . . the idea that Christians will be judged on the basis of conformity to the will of God expressed in Christ’s teaching is found in many places in the NT. . . . God’s gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey him; it sets it on a new footing.”

⁸⁶ ἡ γὰρ κρίσις ἀνέλεος τῶ μὴ ποιήσαντι ἔλεος· κατακαυχᾶται ἔλεος κρίσεως.

⁸⁷ Wachob, *Voice of Jesus*, 108, calls 2:12-13 an epicheireme of which the conclusion is the command to “speak and act” based on the parallel but opposing premises of 2:13. While this weakens the importance of 2:13c, it does also function in “reminding the audience that they will be judged by the law which is fulfilled in the love-command” so that “the conclusion argues that ‘one should show mercy to the poor neighbor/brother’” (109).

⁸⁸ μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται. Deppe, *Sayings of Jesus*, 96-99, does not find this a convincing parallel, despite the popularity of seeing this beatitude in the background. He argues “that these texts have only one word in common and that term, mercy, diverges in form. Whereas Mt. 5:7 is written as a blessing, Jas. 2:13a embodies the form of a threat. Furthermore, the teaching that human mercy breeds a positive divine response (Jas. 2:13a) is popular not only in Jesus’ teaching (cf. also Mt. 18:23-35; 6:12; Lk. 11:4) but also outside the limits of his influence” (97).

⁸⁹ Martin, *James*, 72, describes it as a courtroom scene wherein Jesus brings our “evidence (deeds of mercy) to the coming judge and presents our case based on our identity with the poor, in turn patterned on his identity with them. . . . It is only because of God’s mercy that our acts of mercy (which are inspired by his) are accepted as evidence of a true life in the new creation (1:18) and thus characteristic of salvation.”

merciful deeds in order to “pass” at judgment time, but rather a transformation into the character of God who calls, recreates, empowers, and teaches us and who ultimately responds to even our small attempts at mercy with his own much greater mercy rather than giving us the condemnation we deserve.⁹⁰ But those who choose instead to oppress the poor, condemn and ridicule their neighbors, and walk in pride and envy reveal themselves to be in opposition to the “word of truth” and the “law of freedom,” placing themselves outside of the merciful who receive mercy in the final judgment.⁹¹

Conclusion

James’ theology can be seen from both the human and divine perspectives. From the individual’s view, the one who is merciful (1:27; 2:13), the one who is a “doer of the word” and not a hearer only (1:22-25; 2:14-26; 4:11-12), the one who endures (1:3-5, 12; 5:7-8), that one is absolutely secure, resting in the bountiful mercy of the Lord. From the divine perspective, there is forgiveness for those who repent (4:6-10; 5:19-20), wisdom for the weak (1:5), and purpose for the outcast (2:5), but even more importantly there is grace in the choosing (1:18) and mercy in the judging (2:13). But these things are within the covenantal context whereby God rightly expects his people to behave in accordance with his own character. As he has called and re-birthed his people, they should be pure of heart (1:21, 27; 3:13-18; 4:1-10) and merciful in their reckoning of others (2:1-12). Those who fail, however, reveal their heart to be unchanged, in love with the world rather than God (1:6-8; 4:1-5), controlled by their own desires (1:14-16; 3:14-16), and interested solely in their own comfort (4:13-

⁹⁰ Michael J. Townsend, *The Epistle of James* (London: Epworth, 1994), 43, warns: “Judgment without mercy is a frightening prospect, but it remains possible for human beings to cut themselves off from the mercy which God desires to show, and one way of doing this is to refuse to show mercy to others. The intimate connection between showing mercy (to others) and in turn receiving mercy (from God) is found in Matt. 5.7, which surely lies behind what James says in v.13a. The principle is illustrated by the story of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18.23ff.) and specifically referred to by Jesus in his teaching on judgment (Matt. 7.2). Moreover, every time they pray the Lord’s Prayer, Christians invite God to show them mercy in precisely the way they have shown mercy to others (see Matt. 6.12, 14). It is not a matter of an unmerciful God; it is a matter of whether a person’s character has begun to reflect the very nature of God himself.” There is no sense in which a person who is unmerciful or “workless” can be “saved as though through fire” (cf. Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character through Testing* [Irving, Tex.: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994], 63, 72), but rather that works of mercy reveal the person who is saved eschatologically.

⁹¹ This also follows Jesus’ teaching on the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, wherein the merciful are the ones who receive the merciful judgment

17; 5:1-6). These people reveal their hearts to be untransformed by the *logos* of God given to them. Ultimately, sustained disobedience without repentance leads to dire and very serious warnings of judgment. In contrast, those who “receive” the *logos* and obey it, despite their imperfection, find mercy in the judgment day. God opposes the proud who oppose him (4:6) but is full of compassion and mercy for those who seek his ways (5:11).

What does this mean for understanding James’ theology of salvation? For one, counter to Dibelius and Luther, James does have a sustained theology that undergirds his exhortations, and it is a theology rooted in the extravagant mercy of God, a mercy that goes from election to eternity. He seeks to communicate, however, that God’s election is not for its own sake but for transformation. While God may lean on the side of mercy whenever possible, he is also the just judge. We are saved by the word of truth, but for it to be effective for salvation it must be received and acted upon—until the word is enacted, we merely deceive ourselves. As James writes, we must “*receive* the implanted word which has the power to save [our] soul[s]” (Jas 1:21). To ignore it is our peril, to obey it is to heed the call of our Savior.

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