public fashion. Finally, the pastor admitted culpability. He had lied, he said, to save the church from scandal and to save himself. The result was catastrophic for the church. The elders who had trusted the pastor were duped by him and fell into disgrace in the eyes of both church and community. In this case the tongue perpetuated an evil and spread the venom of the original evil, infecting all who came into contact with it. How many lies were told to cover the original lie, which covered the sin of abuse? How much faithfulness and integrity were besmirched because of that first lie? Our words, when sinful, grow in malevolent effect far more quickly than we imagine. This is a case in which the tongue of a pastor, in telling a selfish lie, infected and destroyed an entire congregation.

In the chapter entitled "Queen Alice" of his *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll has the Red Queen say, "When once you've said a thing, that fixes it, and you must take the consequences." Our tongues may be small, but like a tiny spark that sets a blaze, our tongues can do untold damage to others.

Several years ago I was backpacking with some friends in northern California. On the morning of the last day, during a thunderstorm, we realized that a forest fire was not far away. As the day wore on, the air became increasingly thick with smoke. All day long we could hear and sometimes see the planes as they prepared to drop fire-arresting chemicals on the blaze. When we reached our car and turned on the radio, we learned that the fire had burned to the area where we had camped just the night before. After burning several hundred acres, the fire was arrested by a combination of the storm and the efforts of fire fighters. It had started as the result of one careless match. There is great potential stored up in the tongue, just as there is great potential in the position of teacher. Both must be exercised with the wisdom of God.

James 3:13–18

WHO IS WISE and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. [14]But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. [15]Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. [16]For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

[17]But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. [18]Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

Original Meaning

JAMES HERE OFFERS us a series of clear contrasts between two kinds of wisdom. This passage is also a fine example of the essential unity of the letter, despite the opinion of many that the letter is an ill-fitting collection of moral teachings.[1] The early portion of chapter 3 dealt with the problem of false teachers and their dangerous teaching by employing the image of the tongue. This "fire" (3:5–12) is almost certainly the cause of the bitter envy, ambition, and divisions discussed in the present section.

James holds up for approbation the wise teacher and the wisdom that comes from God and contrasts it with the false wisdom offered by his opponents. James also continues here his discussion of the source of the evil within us. In chapter 1 James touched on the presence of the *yeṣer ha-ra* within us, and in 3:6 he referred to Gehenna, a circumlocution for Satan. In 3:15 James offers a more direct observation: Some within the church are exhibiting behaviors that are "of the devil." This telescopic series of statements concerning the source of evil therefore anchors this passage firmly within the letter as a whole. Clearly we have here the product of careful thought, for it is marked by clarity of thematic structure and dexterity of presentation.

1. Based largely on grammatical evidence, Dibelius argued that this section was originally an independent unit, as there appeared to be "no connection of thought" to the preceding argument in James (M. Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, rev. H. Greeven, tr. M. A. Williams [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], 207). However one weighs the grammatical evidence, there are, in fact, numerous connections.

Five pieces of evidence demonstrate this care on the part of our author. (1) The entire section is marked by the idea of wisdom, which serves to bracket the passage and appears in verses 13 and 17. (2) These verses employ two catalogues: a list of vices with their corresponding evil origins, and a list of virtues with their corresponding wholesome origins. Note particularly the descending order found in verse 15: "earthly, unspiritual, [and finally] of the devil." (3) The list of virtues in verse 17 is marked by assonance (see below). (4) The use of wisdom (*sophia*) suggests a contrast with the "wisdom" of the teachers James has called into question.[2] Furthermore, the themes of discordant community life, envy, and ambition are present not only here but in the preceding sections. In fact, this section serves as a kind of summary statement for what has gone before, positing that teachers and others should not misuse the tongue, but rather develop authentic Christian virtues. (5) Finally, the passage contains an earlier and prominent theme: Faith without works is dead (2:14–26). The theme appears here in terms of heavenly wisdom and the sort of deeds that are its evidence and confirmation.

James here offers a contrast of two wisdoms. *False* wisdom is marked by "envy" and "selfish ambition," two traits that are the tangible result of false teaching within the lives of those who follow it. James notes these and points out that such traits cannot be of God; therefore, the teaching that spawns them is false. The result of these traits in action is disorder and even "evil practice" within the Christian community. James has already told us that he believes faith results in good deeds (2:14–26). He now reveals that aberrant faith also reveals itself by its deeds. Once again we are reminded of the teaching of Jesus: "Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit" (Matt. 7:17).

True wisdom reveals itself by several markers as well. These include "deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13). Such deads reveal a person connected to the "truth" (v. 14)—a term James reserves for the proper understanding of the Christian life, one that combines a healthy cultivation of the word and shows itself in action. Those who follow true wisdom are described by seven attributes, which function as the mirror images of the blunt description of the false teachers present in verses 14–16. The practical result of this wise teaching is peace within the community. This is not a false peace at any cost, for James is insistent on placing his convictions

2. As Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 1, the "wisdom" of this world (the pursuit of which is dominated by self-interest, the desire for wealth, and the desire for status) is diametrically opposed to the wisdom of God. James has made a case similar to that of Paul in 1 Cor. 2 and 3.

beyond equivocation. It is, rather, the peace that comes from making correct but difficult decisions.

As far as James's structure here is concerned, the opening verse establishes the topic to be discussed. It is followed by a double list of virtues and vices. Worldly wisdom (3:14–16) as offered by the teachers with whom James is at odds is characterized by ambition and a desire to seek status through wealth or the securing of a position of power. True wisdom (3:13, 17) implies a vision of heaven, is marked by humility, and results in good deeds. The passage concludes with an apt proverb: "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."

Pure Speech Comes From Wisdom

JAMES BEGINS BY offering an alternative vision of wisdom to that of his opponents, that true wisdom is marked not by ambition and a desire for status, but rather by humility. The chief interpretive problem of verse 13 is the identification of the "who" that opens the passage. Clearly the teachers whom James has opposed are in view. They have arrogated to themselves a position of authority as those qualified to instruct the Christian community, and in so doing have offered themselves as "wise," just as the false teachers of 1 Corinthians 1:19 laid claim to the mantle of wisdom. In James's eyes, however, it is a wisdom of the world and therefore false. But it is also likely that many others within the church are within the field of the author's gaze. Certainly there were some, perhaps more than a few, who were captivated by the message of these teachers, a message that spoke to their human desires to attain privilege and status.

The fact that James connects someone who is wise (*sophos*) and understanding (*epistemon*) is significant. In the LXX these two terms are frequently linked. In Deuteronomy 1:13, 15 the terms refer to leaders, but in 4:6 they appear in tandem and refer to the people at large.[3] To follow God's decrees is the hallmark of wisdom. Other nations, the Hebrews are promised, will call them wise if their deeds match the decrees of God. Just as in James, the leaders of Deuteronomy 1:13, 15 must have deeds to match their words.

James next offers a rapier-thrust definition of wisdom intended to devastate the position of his opponents. True wisdom, he claims, results in humility and good deeds shown in a "good life." The noun the NIV translates as "life" is *anastrophe*, which is better rendered "way of life" or "mode of life"—a term

3. See also Dan. 5:12, in which Daniel is described as a man with a "keen mind and knowledge and understanding." In Job 28:28 God, apparently addressing the entire human community through Job, says, "The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding."

used favorably by 1 Peter (1:15; 2:12; 3:1–2, 16). The force of the term indicates that these deeds of humility relate to the core of the Christian. True believers radiate such principles and actions.

The contrast is not between a practical wisdom that results in action and an earthly wisdom that affects only the life of the mind, as Martin seems to suggest.[4] The "worldly wisdom" of the false teachers has not been so irenic or ineffectual. It has had its corrosive effects. This acid force has manifested itself in concrete actions—acts of favoritism within the Christian community and a legitimizing of actions that are at odds with the "law of love." Rather, the contrast is between the different origins of these two "wisdoms" and between the different actions that follow in train.

The phrase *en prauteti sophias* ("the humility that comes from wisdom") is somewhat unwieldy, suggesting that its origin is Hebrew and not Greek. There are parallels in both the Old Testament and the New. Neither Moses (see Num. 12:1–3) nor Jesus (see Matt. 11:29) were interested in personal popularity or power, nor did they defend themselves, but in humility pointed others to God.[5] In similar fashion the Christian in humility is to do good deeds to the glory of God. This is the spirit of true wisdom.

Verse 14 presents a contrasting picture: a bitter and selfish person. Here, instead of the indirect address of verse 13 ("Who ... among you"), James becomes more direct: "If you. . . ." Although James writes a conditional clause, the rhetorical force is such that it is a statement of fact and accusation. The term the NIV translates as "bitter envy" is *zelon pikron*. *Zelon* is derived from *zelos*, which is often translated into English as "zeal." It can bear a negative nuance,[6] often depicting some overblown and therefore inappropriate sense of devotion to God. Paul describes his own past as marked by a zeal for God in persecuting the church.[7] The term can also be used in the positive sense,[8] but of course any zeal has the potential for great destruction if turned. In this case zeal for self-interest has resulted in attitudes of envy and desire, which engulf whatever better judgment may have been present.

The term the NIV translates as "selfish ambition" is *eritheia*. Some argue that this word is derived from *eris*, which can mean "discord."[9] However, others point out that the word is rare outside the New Testament; its only appearance prior to the New Testament is in Aristotle, who uses it to mean the self-seeking pursuit of political power by unjust means.[10] This more precise rendering makes sense here. Paul's use of *eris* appears in lists of vices and, together with *zelos*, describes leaders who cause discord by claiming superior wisdom and by gathering to themselves followers while they charge others in the church with a lack of spirituality. Discord has come to the Christian community as a result of their status-seeking, and they have usurped the spiritual offices of the church in order to teach and propagate this worldly philosophy.

To understand James's urging these teachers and their followers to refrain from "boast[ing] about it" (v. 14), we must first understand to what the "it" refers. Most likely this refers to the wisdom they claim. So we might translate: "Do not boast about your worldly wisdom, because to do so is only to deny the truth even more clearly." This causal sense is endorsed by Ropes.[11] What the teachers falsely call "wisdom" is in fact the virulent work of the *yeṣer ha-ra* in human hearts. There is a heavenly truth—a truth they deny, a truth that is the polar opposite of the "truth" they disseminate.

Significantly, in verse 15 James does not call what his opponents espouse wisdom, preferring to refer to it in veiled fashion. Their "wisdom" is not from God, which can be had simply by asking (1:5). In saying this James makes a clear argument that the wisdom of these teachers is not neutral or trivial. He does this by arranging the sources of this "wisdom" in an escalating crescendo of perniciousness. The first is *epigeios*, or "earthbound." Here the image of the world, as elsewhere in James, plays a negative role. "Earthly" by definition is less pure and inferior, and in this instance refers to the forces arrayed against God. James also intends to remind his readers that the world is at odds with God. He is saying, "Do not fool yourself into thinking that this attitude is in concert with God, for such is a lie."

Next, this wisdom is *psychikos*, or "unspiritual." This is a fairly unusual word, found in only four other locations in the New Testament.[12] Paul uses the term to describe the "natural man,"[13] as it is drawn from Genesis 2:7, where God breathes life into Adam and he becomes a living *psyche*. In this regard it can denote the unrealized potential to respond positively to God. *Psychikos* was sometimes used by heterodox groups to describe their opponents.[14] The term therefore denoted beings possessing merely life, bereft of

4. Ralph P. Martin, *James*, 129.

5. Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 150.

6. See Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20.

7. Phil. 3:6. See also Rom. 10:2, where Paul describes the Israelites—"they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge."

8. See 1 Kings 19:10, 14; John 2:17; 2 Cor. 7:7; esp. 11:2, where Paul speaks of "godly jealousy."

9. Paul uses it this way; see 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20, two texts cited above.

10. Aristotle, *Politics*, 5.3.

11. James H. Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James*, 246.

12. 1 Cor. 2:14; 15:44, 46; Jude 19.

13. See G. B. Caird and L. D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon 1994), 99–100.

14. Tertullian (*Against Praxeas*, 1.6) relates that the Montanists branded the orthodox with this term.

the touch of the Spirit of God. Such persons were responsive only to natural stimuli. The false teachers had accused James of this and of a lack of wisdom. Deftly James causes this accusation to turn in their hands. He points out that the activity of the false teachers, this self-righteous name-calling, is in fact a facade that is the result of the very natural, base, and unspiritual desire for personal status and prestige.

Such "wisdom" is, worst of all, demonic in origin. This term, *daimoniodes*, is rare; it appears nowhere else in Scripture and is not to be found in Greek literature before James. There are two options as to its meaning: (1) This teaching and its derivative behavior is instigated by demons and the unwholesome spiritual world; or (2) the behavior depicted here is similar to that of the demons. There is no good reason to suppose that James did not have the first in mind.

In verse 16 James argues from the perspective of the practical. The wisdom of his opponents, rooted in "envy and selfish ambition," has done nothing to strengthen the body, but rather has served only to bring "disorder and every evil practice." True wisdom does not confuse issues of primary allegiance with those of secondary or tertiary character.[15] It does not brook the discord that results from selfish personal interest. The source of such tumult and mean-spirited talk is Satan. The word the NIV renders as "disorder" is *akatastasia*, the same word used in 1:8 for the unstable, double-minded person. Here, as in 3:8, the scenario is writ large as the subject is not an individual, but the Christian community. This teaching has not added to the church, but instead has caused the church seriously to question its direction, and even its heart and soul. Combined with this is all manner of evil practice.

James goes on, then, to outline what he considers to be among the most important results of heavenly wisdom. He does so in a list of virtues similar to those given by Paul in his list of "the fruit of the Spirit." James has offered seven for consideration. First, this wisdom is marked by purity. The Greek term, *hagne*, is unusual.[16] It connotes the absence of the spiritual, ethical, and behavioral imperfections that are necessarily a part of the double-minded person. The idea is found in the Old Testament, usually in connection with the character of God. God's words are pure (Ps. 12:6); and the ways of the righteous are pure, not bent (Prov. 21:8), because their lives mirror God's character. Here, then, is another reference to the rightful "end" or "purpose" of humankind.[17] A person marked by purity partakes of the character of God,

15. While the speech of Jesus is often hyperbolic—"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26)—the point is clear: Jesus demands our primary allegiance.

16. See also Phil. 4:8; 1 John 3:3.

17. See the discussion concerning the meaning of "mature" and "complete" in 1:4 and 3:7.

following after God with "unmixed motives."[18] Purity is listed first because in many ways it is the most important, paving the way for the others.

James has arranged the remaining seven virtues to employ assonance, first with *e*, then with *a*: peace-loving (*eirenike*), considerate (*epieikes*), submissive (*eupeithes*), full of mercy (*meste eleous*), good fruit (*karpon agathon*), impartial (*adiakritos*), and sincere (*anupokritos*). Such wisdom also creates a peace-making spirit. This is of particular importance here, given the problem of discord in the church.

"Considerate" is usually associated with justice, especially with the administration of justice, and suggests someone who does not abuse a position of power, but remains calm and sober and true to the highest ideals of such a position.[19]

"Submissive" can mean "trusting" and "easily persuaded." It does not indicate a person without convictions or one easily swayed. Rather, it conjures the image of a sober, thinking, and intuitive person who recognizes the truth when heard and willingly receives such instruction. Together the pair denote someone who is both gentle and reasonable, whether in a position of authority or of subservience.

James next mentions "full of mercy" and "good fruits" (*karpon agathon*). Earlier, he has told us that true religion is evidenced by acts of kindness (1:27) and that faith is seen in deeds of love (2:15–18).

Finally, James offers for consideration "impartial and sincere." The first is a word of great rarity, found only here in the New Testament. It is the opposite of "double-minded," a word James has used frequently. Wisdom, then, is without double-mindedness; it possesses a singularity of purpose in its trust in God. "Sincere" is a fine capstone to the list, as it also means "without hypocrisy."

Taken as a whole these words counteract the divisive and party spirit and prompt an openness to God's leading, so that even the teachers James opposes might "see the light."

In his final comment, James not surprisingly focuses on peace, given the discord in the church. Righteousness and peace are regularly linked in the Old Testament (see Ps. 85:10; Isa. 32:17). Isaiah 32–33 is of particular importance, as in these chapters the image of cultivation is linked with righteousness and peace.

The phrase "harvest of righteousness" is somewhat difficult in that the genitive can be read as either "the harvest that belongs to righteousness" or "the harvest that consists of righteousness." In the first righteousness has a fruit

18. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 154.

19. In 1 Tim. 3:3 Paul uses it to describe the ideal behavior of church leaders.

that will be produced in the context of peace; in the second "peace" is the condition that gives rise to righteousness. Laws[20] insightfully argues that the "harvest of righteousness" is in fact wisdom. If she is correct, then the argument of James is as follows: (1) Where there is divisiveness, there is no wisdom; (2) wisdom is peaceable; (3) therefore, the peacemakers are the ones who possess wisdom; and (4) the ones who create tumult and discord do not possess wisdom, however much they protest to the opposite. The opponents of James have claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to possess a superior wisdom. By defining wisdom in biblical terms, James has shown his opponents to be purveyors of a highly corrosive brew of worldly wisdom and deficient teaching. In short, he has shown them to be *psychikoi*, the very charge they leveled at James.

Bridging Contexts

THE PASSAGE BEFORE us is comprised of a discussion of true and false wisdom. Such teaching is not simply an arid intellectual exercise. Rather, in the experience of James teaching about God is always potent, extending to all areas of human endeavor. Pure teaching and sullied teaching both have effects. He is at pains in this section to make those effects clear. James sums up this section by encouraging his readers to be peacemakers.

The most significant single issue for investigation in this section is the biblical notion of peace. There are several reasons for this. (1) Peace is the point of the concluding proverb, and this is a clear sign that the idea of peace is significant for our author. (2) Wisdom, the gift from God (1:5), is needed to help us achieve maturity, and maturity is connected to righteousness. Righteousness is, as James tells us, the harvest realized by peacemakers. (3) Thus, peace is the idea that gathers together a number of disparate ideas that are at work in this passage, as the wisdom of God leads to the peace and wholeness God desires of and for us. Unless this is discerned, we will be unable to understand the richness of James's thought, and we will be tempted to seek contemporary applications that settle for inferior, abiblical notions of peace. It is for these reasons that "peace" is the subject of this Bridging Contexts section.

The richly textured Old Testament notion of "peace" (*šalom*) is one of those ideas that can legitimately be linked to a single word. *Šalom* means "to be whole, to be healthy, to be complete." In this regard it is distinct from most words for peace. For example, the Greek word *homonoia* ("harmony") originally conveyed only a negative meaning, denoting the absence of political

20. Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 165–66.

turmoil within a city. Only later did this word come to possess a positive nuance. But *šalom* bore from the outset a primarily positive meaning. In the LXX *eirene* ("peace") is regularly used to translate *šalom*, and it occurs over 250 times.[21] While other terms can be used, depending on the nuance of *šalom* in a given context, in the LXX *eirene* appears when the wholeness and well-being that is of God is in view.

Šalom was employed in the Old Testament in a dizzying variety of ways. The daily greeting in Israel was *šalom 'alekem* ("peace be upon you"), a blessing and greeting meaning "may you be well."[22] The Old Testament also contrasts peace with warfare, but the emphasis is on peace as close and harmonious relations among peoples.[23] *Šalom* is used of prosperity (Ps. 73:3), physical health (38:3), and salvation (Isa. 43:7). It can also be used in connection with death. The promise to Abraham is, "You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age" (Gen. 15:15). *Šalom* is likewise connected to the covenant. In Numbers 25:12 the Lord says to Moses, "I am making my covenant of peace. . . ."

True wholeness, true peace, is intimately linked with the character of God. This idea is present in Psalm 34:14, where the psalmist says, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." Here we see the notion of peace linked to the twin ideas of justice and righteousness, which together are integral components of the character of God. We should not forget that the definition James has offered for "true religion" is the embodiment of the notion of justice and righteousness: to visit widows and orphans (James 1:27). In Psalm 34 peace is substantial, it is linked to the very core of God's character, and it must be pursued. The idea of "truth" (*'emet*) is added to this complex when in Zechariah 8:16–17, 19 God addresses the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah:

> "Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD. . . ."Therefore love truth and peace."

Of course, the reality of life dictates that peace such as this is rarely known. For this reason peace has a future orientation as well. The "Prince of Peace" is the agent of God who brings God's justice, truth, and peace.

21. H. Beck, C. Brown, "Peace," *NIDNTT*, 2:777.

22. Joseph P. Healey, "Peace," *ABD*, 5:206.

23. In 1 Kings 5:4 Solomon says, "The LORD my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster." In Judg. 4:17 we read, "Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite."

In the New Testament the idea of peace is prominent in the teachings of Jesus. It is significant that in the Beatitudes the term "peacemaker" is one of virility; all the other characteristics mentioned by Jesus "designate a state or an attitude, while this one describes a concrete act."[24] Peace, then, is the creation and maintenance of a state of truth, honesty, righteousness, and justice. This notion of wholeness in terms of social relations has obvious merit, given the context in the church of James. But the question of truth and justice should not be overlooked.

When James encourages his readers to be "peacemakers who sow in peace [and who] raise a harvest of righteousness," it is this complex idea of *šalom* to which he refers. Justice, righteousness, and peace are central to the character of God. To develop such character in ourselves and within the Christian community has been a frequent theme throughout the course of this letter. What remains is to consider how its use as revealed here can be applied today.

Contemporary Significance

EVANGELICALS WOULD DO well to recapture the biblical idea of peace. In practice we often confuse the biblical idea of peace with its impoverished modern counterpart, the absence of obvious tension. We do this in part because we find it expedient in the short run to avoid disagreement and the tension it brings.

In a passage in Thucydides, a Corinthian delegation attempted to persuade the Athenians to join their cause with the words, "The true path of expediency is the path of right."[25] The Corinthians spoke the truth, but in the long annals of human history there is little evidence to support the popularity of their view. Our more typical course of action is to succumb to the temptation of the path that in prospect seems to afford the least resistance and the smallest chance of personal harm. Having registered our choice, we honor it with pious rationalizations.

The evangelical church is not immune from this pervasive malady. In fact, it is surprising how frequently the contemporary evangelical church has blindly chosen nonbiblical ideas of "peace" instead of the more profound biblical idea. Routinely we pursue peace as "absence or denial of tension within the body" over peace as "wholeness within the body." Most evangelical churches I know of are petrified of tension; thus, discussion of issues that might cause conflict is suppressed. In the last four months I have heard a number of such stories—some fresh, some the memories of events long past.

24. William Klassen, "Peace," *ABD*, 5:209.
25. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.42.

- To the surprise of many within a congregation, one of their associate pastors was dismissed. A few in the congregation knew that there were problems afoot, and others felt the pastor in question was not effective. Many others, however, disagreed, having found the pastor quite helpful. The announcement of dismissal, therefore, was a shock. Still more surprising to many was the service on the last Sunday of the pastor's tenure. A litany was prepared, in which both the pastor and the congregation read appeals of forgiveness asked of one another. To many in the congregation this seemed excessively odd. There has been no further discussion.
- The entire executive board of a church resigned, claiming that the pastor was "running the church" through his friends instead of through the elected board structure. Tension between the pastor and the board had been growing for nearly a year. The congregation at large had been deliberately and effectively shielded from this growing tension by both parties. Both had begun to elicit support for their positions from selected members of the congregation. To most, however, knowledge of this development came only with the mass resignation. This brinkmanship soured the spirit of the church, and attendance dropped 45 percent.
- A volunteer counselor with the youth group was found in a mildly compromising position with a female student. The volunteer was dismissed from the high school counseling staff, and the pastoral staff at the church decided to cover up the incident. Nonetheless, reports of the incident began to circulate in the small community, many of them wildly exaggerated. The church continued to stonewall the truth. Respect for the church in the community, which had been high, began a rapid free-fall.
- After two years of prayer and deliberation, a congregation decided to move forward with plans to build a new and larger sanctuary, a plan with which the pastor was in full accord. During the week following the vote, however, several members of the congregation met secretly with the pastor and convinced him to change his mind. The following Sunday the pastor dutifully announced that he now viewed the plans to build a new sanctuary "sinful." The pastor soon left the church, realizing that he had been manipulated. The leaders of the "coup" and the elected leaders of the church have refused in the ensuing decade to speak with each other or about that chapter in the history of the church, citing the need to "keep peace" within the congregation.
- A new senior pastor announces to the congregation that he desires the entire staff to stay in place, but in private makes it clear to one staff

member that his resignation is required. The resignation comes as a surprise to many, and when asked if he is being "forced out," the staff person lies with the words, "in the interests of peace and the welfare of the church."

- A church member and frequent soloist is upset because the pastor has not agreed with her wish to be the featured Sunday morning soloist at least twice a month. She and her family leave the church, and no one besides the two principals knows why. When asked, neither will speak of the matter.
- A church that has remained at two hundred members for fifteen years has called a new pastor. He quickly realizes that there is a difficult family in the church. This couple insists on having their own way, even to the point of offering threats during business meetings of the church. Many church members commiserate with the new pastor and inform him that this couple has dominated the church for years, but no one wishes to go through the unpleasantness of crossing them. The pastor learns that the husband has been brought up on charges of child abuse in the past, and in a private session informs him that he can no longer work with the youth of the church. Realizing that the pastor cannot speak of this publicly, the man attempts to malign the pastor for excluding him from ministry. The pastor is days away from accepting a call to another church before the leadership finally stands up to this controlling couple.

None of these cases is simple. There are, as always, mitigating circumstances that must be considered. One of these is the protection of the privacy of individuals, whether pastors or members of the congregation. A second is often cited, the Pauline demand to protect the unity of the church in order to keep "peace" in the church. It is important to recognize that this command appears in a particular context in Philippians, a context in which Paul argues for the unity of the church, not so much as an end in itself but so the church may be firmly fastened upon its primary task, which he says is the spread of the gospel (Phil. 1:27; 4:2–3). If the church is consumed with divisions over tertiary issues to the extent that primary concerns are left unattended, then a not insignificant evil has been committed. In some of these situations listed above, either mitigating factor could legitimately be invoked. Nonetheless, there is something about contemporary evangelicalism that comes up short when compared to the biblical idea of peace.

Recently I asked a colleague to lead one of my classes through a discussion of "Christian community." She began by inquiring of the students their impressions of relationships within the church. The initial responses were

slow and halting, but within two minutes they came fast and furious. I dutifully recorded as many of their answers as I could. Here is the list:

- People put up a facade.
- Relationships are basically superficial.
- Most of the time people are not sincere.
- But there are plenty of people who are caring.
- It often feels artificial.
- People are really "nice," as in the appearance of peace.
- People are usually considerate.
- When people are friendly, it is usually with other Christians; it is not usually extended to those outside the church.
- People are too busy.
- The church is not egalitarian, but highly structured.
- The church is hierarchical, with clear, unspoken rules of power: pastor, deacons, long-time members, and wealthy members have the power.
- People want to avoid conflict.

My colleague then asked them why they think this is so, given the biblical model of Christian community. Once again I recorded as many of their answers as I could:

- We have other priorities—money, appearance, recognition.
- We are dishonest with ourselves about these, our true priorities.
- We fear persecution by the world.
- We are afraid of the consequences of the truth. We often avoid telling someone else the truth, and we tell ourselves this is because we wish to protect their feelings. But we know the real reason is that we don't want to have to deal with the potential unpleasantness of the situation.
- We are afraid of facing the fact that we cannot live up to biblical standards.
- We realize we cannot make a difference in the world or even in our church, so why try?

Finally, she asked them to describe the values our culture seems to extol or which mark our culture:

- Materialism—we want things.
- We want attention, even fame.
- We desire greed, power, status.
- We are careless about other people, especially people we do not know.
- Our culture loves temptation.

- Self-protection
- Fear
- Aggression
- Envy
- Pride, not humility
- Assumption. We do not bother to find out; we simply make assumptions about people and judge them on superficial grounds, without really knowing them.

In our desire to preserve what is an unbiblical "peace," have we produced a situation of such unbiblical proportions? I was struck by several issues as I heard my students speak. I was impressed that they identified themselves with the deeper issues in the second group of responses. I was also struck by their fear of not measuring up to God's standards. This is wholly commensurate with James. His letter teaches adherence to an exacting standard. But it also teaches the forgiveness of God and the truth that as the word is planted within and is nurtured, the Christian can grow into "perfection" (1:4, 18).

The final point that struck me about these three lists was the degree of correspondence between them and the list of vices outlined by James. His catalogue of evil in chapter 3 is frighteningly similar to the model of the biological growth of evil pictured in 1:15. These vices have their origin in desires that are "earthly, unspiritual, of the devil" (3:15), which lead to "envy and selfish ambition," which in turn cause "disorder" (3:16) within the Christian community. James steadfastly refuses to allow us to view such developments as trivial. Their origin is unwholesome, and however innocent or irenic the garb in which initially they are clothed, ultimately they are a cancer in the body.

It is for this reason that James used unreservedly strong language in 3:1–12 in his discussion of false teachers, false teaching, and the devastating effect these have on the community. Do not be fooled or cowed, James intones. Such teaching, and the failure to recognize and resist it, is dangerous in the extreme. The poison begins innocently, in the fertile receptacle of our minds and hearts. It grows to dominate our actions. Finally, through our actions it spreads to infect the community around us. The most effective course to avoid this evil, James reminds us, is to walk firmly and with resolve in the path of heavenly wisdom and its fruits.

The impressions of my students do not, of course, convey the entire picture of American evangelicalism. There is more that can be said, much of it positive. But they are nonetheless accurate in pointing to features that, if not the entirety of the landscape, are nonetheless present. These impressions must be set in contrast with the catalogue James has left for us concerning a life in accord with "wisdom that comes from heaven," which results in peace.

In 3:13 James speaks of heavenly wisdom placing its stamp upon an entire "mode of life" (*anastrophes*). The seven traits he outlines make for such a "consistent life" shaped by heavenly wisdom: It is "pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." Together these are the characteristics of the peacemaker in 3:18.

"Purity" reflects God's character. A pure person follows God's decrees with motives unmixed. For such an individual the cleansing of 4:7–8 is unnecessary. The motives of the soloist mentioned above were not unmixed. She may well have imagined only pure motives, but I am confident most observers would detect a self-centered *prima donna* attitude at work here, not the humble and unselfish attitude extolled by James.

There are also cases in which mitigating circumstances might apply. Several years ago a friend of mine became friends with the members of a Christian heavy-metal band. Proudly she told me how the band would throw Bibles into the audience during their performances. While I hold reservations about the wisdom of this style of ministry and evangelism, it may be effective for some. She also showed me pictures of herself with the band members. I could not help but notice their pants. They were leather and skin-tight, so tight that nothing was left to the imagination—precisely the sort of pants that members of heavy-metal bands in the secular music industry wore. Perhaps I am something of a prude, but this seemed a mixed message to me.

As we have seen, "considerate" is usually associated with justice, particularly the avoidance of the abuse of power. Power has been an issue much in my mind of late. Some time ago I was asked to speak to a group of pastors about church governance, specifically about the role of the pastor, the boards, and the congregation in terms of the New Testament. With but a little probing I realized that the real issue was power. At least the most vocal members of the steering committee wished to see justification for greater power in the hands of the pastor. I am chary of power, as I believe James to be. But he places before us a key characteristic for those in power: consideration.

The first pastor I served under continues to have my utmost respect as a man of integrity, character, and consideration. Although superficially he can appear brusque, and although many view him as dictatorial (during those early years he once told me, "If you don't know which way the vote in your board is going to go, then you have not done your homework"), I know better, for I have the privilege of knowing him well. Several times during the three years we worked together I saw him absorb misplaced and misdirected vituperation because he had the integrity not to reveal confidential information or information that might be damaging to someone else. In the years since, I have known many leaders, and nearly everyone has failed this very

test. This pastor is a man who is unswerving in his dedication to see the work of Christ go forward and is diligent in attempting to discern the voice of God. He will not countenance wavering when the integrity of the gospel or the work of Christ is at issue. But he remains tolerant and even untroubled by misinformed forces that often work to his great personal detriment.

James includes in this list of virtues "submissive," meaning one who recognizes the truth of God when it is heard and willingly submits to it. After spending more than a decade in pastoral ministry, I cast my lot with the academy, becoming a full-time professor in 1992. People often ask me which I prefer, and I can honestly say that both have appeal for me and that in my present capacity I am able to move in both worlds. But there is one aspect of pastoral ministry that I miss with passionate longing—the joy of working with a leadership team. During my last five years in ministry I had the privilege of working with a group of leaders, each of us solidly committed to God, to each other, and to the goals we had prayerfully established. Often we disagreed on precisely how to reach a certain goal; but once a decision was made, each of us willingly made ourselves submissive to that plan, that strategy, that program.

Such teamwork is not cheaply bought. We were a diverse group: black, Asian, white, even some from foreign countries; some were from wealth, others grew up in poverty. It took honesty, risk, and hours together—hours of play as well as work. I particularly remember one long drive with one of our minority leaders. There had been tension between us born of misunderstanding. After five hours of small talk and with only twenty minutes to our destination, I finally fortified my anemic courage and said, "I am concerned about our friendship." The reply surprised me, "What friendship?" We spent the next two hours in deep and honest discussion, sometimes painful, but always in the knowledge that we shared a love of Christ and a love for each other. These virtues of honesty, submissiveness, and compassion suffused our leadership team, and working with them was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

"Mercy" and "good fruit" go together, for mercy has a practical orientation that by definition manifests itself in "good fruit." Mercy is not pity, for pity can be simply the emotion of concern that passes as quickly as the shadow of a cloud. Mercy is compassion that drives one to action. Jesus once addressed the Pharisees: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who will produce its fruit" (Matt. 21:43). Fruit, as we have repeatedly seen, comes from the heart, from character, and character can be shaped.

The film *Rain Man* is in some ways a parable of redemption. Tom Cruise plays Charlie Babbitt, a smooth-talking, sleazy salesman who returns home when he learns that his estranged father has died. When the will is read,

Charlie receives only the Buick convertible from his youth. The remaining millions of his father's estate is left to his institutionalized, autistic older brother Raymond, a brother Charlie did not even know he had. Much of the movie is made up of Charlie trying to hustle the money from Raymond or trying to parlay Raymond's amazing mathematical talents into a fortune in Las Vegas. But a change begins to take place within Charlie. He begins to care for Raymond, even against his own will. His heart changes, and as this change gains in depth and confidence, Charlie begins to do for Raymond more than for himself.

This is a "good fruit" from the heart. There may have been a core of righteousness in the hearts and minds of that small cadre of people who torpedoed the building plans of the congregation, but in the mix was a desire to control, a hatred of losing, and a selfish urge to have the church remain "just the way we like it." Honest reflection may very well have revealed the true origin of their desires.

The final pair of virtues, "impartial" and "sincere" also go together. For James these describe a person who is not double-minded. It is the person who knows the heart of God and therefore the priorities of God. As we have seen earlier, one of the stickiest problems is knowing how to balance "peacemaking" with sticking to principle. One of the keys is understanding the priorities of God. For James these are, in short form, (1) devotion to the spiritual life, so that the word may be planted in you and grow strong; (2) care of the poor and marginalized, not only of their dignity, but also of their material circumstances; (3) a willingness frequently to take stock of oneself, to ensure that the virtues, and not the vices, are growing strong; and (4) the willingness to know the truth of the gospel and stand up for it when it is threatened. But we must remember that even the false teachers were "dear brothers" to James. For "sincerity" conveys the idea of treating all people equally, of holding to both truth and love.

Inherent to the biblical idea of peace is a standard, a caste of heart and mind and consequent behavior congruent with God, and which is, therefore, nonnegotiable. Peace at any price is not peace, as human history readily demonstrates. The horrors of World War I left the peoples of the former allied powers longing for peace and nearly pathologically incapable of believing that another war would ever begin. When the League of Nations conducted a poll on the issue of international disarmament, 10.4 million Britons were in favor, only 870,000 opposed.[26] As the inhumanity of the new Nazi regime became more obvious, the British government, and indeed world

26. William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill; Alone; 1932–1940* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1988), 95.

opinion, seemed blind to the obvious. After an interview with *der Führer*, a British journalist wrote that Hitler had "large, brown eyes—so large and so brown that one might actually grow lyrical about them if one were a woman."[27] In fact, the eyes of the dictator of Germany were blue. The Jewish American journalist Walter Lippmann wrote an article in which he extolled Hitler as "civilized," and spoke of Nazi persecution of the Jews as a way to "satisfy" the German desire to "conquer somebody."[28]

British diplomats, who should have known better, believed that Hitler was basically a man of peace, who wanted only to recover for Germany a modicum of prestige and security. Speaking for the government of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in the House of Commons on March 23, 1933, Anthony Eden said that it is necessary to "appease" Hitler, because if appeased his anger would cool and Germany would become sensible and stable. "Appeasement" at first meant allowing Germany to break the conditions of the Versailles Treaty and forge a military arsenal equal to that of France. Later it came to mean allowing Germany to overrun countries such as Czechoslovakia, countries that Great Britain had sworn to defend. In this way was the honor and integrity of Great Britain compromised. Finally, of course, it meant descent into the cataclysm of another world war. In the early 1930s these British diplomats did not understand the untrammeled voraciousness of evil. Soon enough they would. The *yeṣer ha-ra*, Gehenna, Satan—these are voracious and uncompromising. They are not to be trifled with.

The members of the congregation who allowed one couple to dominate church life sought peace through appeasement. They allowed themselves to impugn the integrity of the biblical call to community by holding to the promise of "peace" in the congregation. By placing their feet on this path, they condemned the church to more than a decade of envy, bitterness, and strife. Peace that leads to righteousness is peace that steadfastly refuses to let go of its standard: justice, righteousness, and the wisdom of God. Peace bought at their sacrifice is not biblical peace.

27. Ibid., 82.
28. *New York Herald Tribune* (May 12, 1933).

James 4:1–10

WHAT CAUSES FIGHTS and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? [2]You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. [3]When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

[4]You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. [5]Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? [6]But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble."

[7]Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. [8]Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. [9]Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. [10]Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Original Meaning

THERE ARE SEVERAL ties between this passage and those which preceded, in spite of a variety of commentators who tell us otherwise.[1] The section just completed (3:13–18) was concerned with true wisdom that issues forth in peace and false wisdom that results in disorder and strife. Here James again discusses disorder (4:2) that results from this same false wisdom, the ultimate source of which is the devil (4:7).

This section also continues enumerating the escalating steps in evil. In 1:14 James introduced the evil desire. In 3:6 he opined that Gehenna was the cause of the tongue's fire. In 3:15 the origin of the "wisdom" of the world was

1. Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 167, sees no structural connection, but does observe that the transition is "understandable."

identified as lodged in the demonic. Here in 4:7 Christians are now told to resist the devil. The pride fostered and nurtured by false wisdom must be humbled, which is the point of the somber grieving of 4:9. The pride of 4:6 is linked to the boasting of 3:14; the selfish ambition of 3:14 is linked to the human heart that needs cleansing (4:8). Finally, the statement that "friendship with the world is hatred toward God" (4:4) refers to the passionate desire of some in the community to seek status and prestige as their surrounding culture defined it. In this pursuit they showed favoritism and displayed an unwillingness to understand the law of love, thereby showing themselves opposed to God.

In these verses James once again points out the two choices arrayed before the church. This is a theme that we have seen before,[2] but here it takes on special significance. The author has just finished laying before us a full dress presentation of the source, origin, and results of the ways of earth and the ways of heaven. He has provided a concrete example of the biological model of the growth of sin offered in chapter 1. So here the two ways are set with particular clarity and urgency before his readers: earthly wisdom or heavenly wisdom, self-interest or the law of love, self-exaltation or exaltation at the hand of God. His language is powerful and graphic: Resist the devil/come near to God; wash your hands/purify your hearts; grieve and mourn/turn joy to gloom; humble yourselves/God will lift you up. The seriousness of the matter is confirmed in the harsh vocabulary James marshals: They "kill" (4:2); they are an "adulterous people" (4:4), whose actions make them "an enemy of God" (4:4); they are "sinners" (4:8).

James 4:1–10 is composed of three sections, of which the first two offer diagnoses of the problems rampant in the church, while the third offers a solution. In verses 1–3 James chastises his readers for their prayers, for these are marked by anger and selfish desire, not by an attitude of trust in God. In verses 4–6 James points out that there are substantial and significant differences between the values of the Roman empire and life lived according to God's desires. A choice must be made; no one can satisfy the demands of both. Then, in verses 7–10, James offers his solution to the various problems besetting the church as he issues a call to repentance.

Prayers Offered in Anger and Desire (4:1–3)

AT THE END of chapter 3 James laid before his readers a positive summation: A harvest of righteousness is promised those who are peacemakers. The rich agricultural image of the verse is particularly striking, given the heavy reliance

2. See the discussion of the two ways in the Original Meaning section of 1:16–18 (pp. 75–78).

on horticultural language James has chosen to employ. Here he turns his probing eye once again to the debilitating effects of the philosophy of false wisdom: "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" James knows full well the answer, so this and the other question in verse 1 are rhetorical in nature.

James returns to the problem of the tongue and compares the effects of the tongue under the influence of false wisdom with rather serious parallels: "fights" (*polemoi*) and "quarrels" (*machai*).[3] Along with his earlier description James paints a picture of a Christian community deeply divided, composed of a variety of groups, some of them marked by different combinations of unwholesome practices. The church is beset by jealousy, selfish ambition, slander, anger, a willingness to depart from received teaching, and a host of other ills that follow the pattern of their culture.

The fact that James refers to no specific dispute might signal to us a situation so rife with tensions that the church was at a standstill. In any event, the conflict is clearly within the Christian community,[4] as this is certainly the meaning of *en hymin* ("among you"). In other words, certain teachers had won a following by offering a philosophy that encouraged the pursuit of status as taught by society and unbridled by any authentic Christian witness. This in turn allowed a false belief to germinate and flourish that all of one's old prejudices could exist and thrive within the church. For this reason some were showing favoritism, while others were exploiting the poor. Arrayed against these were believers loyal to the gospel, who correctly understood the threat. The members of this group reacted variously to those following the teachers of false wisdom—some wanting peace at any price, others advocating a fight for the soul of the church.

In the second part of verse 1, James wisely points to a two-layered interpretation, just like the one sustained throughout 3:1–12. Just as there are mixed within each of us as individuals motives and emotions wholesome and unwholesome, so within the Christian community there is a wide variety of impulses. James says their disputes come from the desires (*hedone*) within them. The rabbis believed that the impulses, the *yeṣarim*, had their seats in various organs or "members" of the human body; therefore, the members of the body were "at war" with one another—pulled one way by conscience, then another way by the evil desire.[5]

3. The term *machai* is related to *machaira*, the Greek word Homer uses to indicate a short sword or a long knife. *Machai* is often reserved for battles without weapons; these battles can be physical or verbal.

4. Recall the decision to define "twelve tribes," "brothers," and "the rich" as each referring to Christians.

5. Although later than the New Testament, these rabbinic sayings are evidence of this "war" among the members of the body. "R. Simeon b. Levi said: The evil *yetzer* of a man waxes

This image is not unknown elsewhere in the New Testament. First Peter 2:11 speaks of "sinful desires," which "war against your soul." In Romans 7:22–23 Paul speaks of the two "laws" within him: "For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war . . . and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (cf. also Gal. 5:17). In speaking of these "desires" we might have expected James to use the term *epithymia*, as he did in James 1:14–15. But *hedone*, like *epithymia*, while semantically neutral, can (as here) carry a negative meaning, such as "sinful passion."[6] The term is used in 4 Maccabees 1:25–26: "And there is in pleasure a malicious disposition." If this passage is the background for the use of *hedone* here, then James's point is that such a person strives against God. However, in Titus 3:3 *hedone* and *epithymia* appear as synonyms, so the use of *hedone* here may be due to stylistic reasons.

It is the passions, or more properly the decision to cultivate rather than control the passions, that have contributed to the problems within the church. These passions (untrammeled desire for power and authority, a desire for popularity within the eyes of the powerful, etc.) constitute a state of double-mindedness. The members of the congregation are pushed this way and that, first by their conscience, then by the evil impulse.

In verse 2a James punctuates his message by noting that unrestrained desire can never be fulfilled. His words "You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want" refers to present difficulties. Several commentators have attempted to see "murder" (*phoneuete*) as metaphorical.[7] Martin desires to treat it literally, but his reconstruction is not convincing.[8] Yet we must agree that the term can and perhaps should be understood literally, even if we do not know the particulars. It is possible, as Martin suggests, that various positions on Roman rule existed within the church, just as it is beyond doubt that various positions on Roman culture were present. Certainly the poor saw those who collaborated with the Romans as traitors. It is significant that James adds the reason for this killing as covetousness. If "killing" is the tool that still does not bring the desired result, then James is explaining that violence is never a solution worthy of pursuit. To choose the path of violence is to place oneself within a vicious cycle of retribution. Only the peace offered by God can stop such a tragic web of circumstances.

strong against him day by day, and seeks to kill him, and if God did not help him, man could not prevail against it" (*Kiddushin* 30b). "The Rabbis say: so hard is the evil *yetzer* that even its Creator calls it evil, as it is said, 'For the *yetzer* of man's heart is evil from his youth' (Genesis 8:21)" (*Kiddushin* 30b). In the Talmud, *b. Nedarim* 32a–32b, the numerical value of *ha-satan* (Satan) is 364, which, claims the Talmud, means that Satan has power over human beings for 364 days a year, but not on the day of Atonement. The Talmud goes on to say that humans are composed of 248 body parts, and the "Good Urge" and the "Evil Urge" struggle over the body as a whole, each lodging in various body parts.

6. See James H. Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James*, 253–54.

7. See comments of Ralph P. Martin, *James*, 146.

8. Martin argues that some of the Christians to whom James writes were former Zealots.

But there are other difficulties with verse 2. The standard edition of the Greek text sees three propositions here: "You desire and you do not have; you murder and you are jealous and you cannot get what you want; you quarrel and you fight." This rendering is followed by the NIV and places "murder/kill" in the role of a preliminary condition that results in unrequited desire. Many commentators prefer a different punctuation, one that sees this verse composed of two parallel statements of cause and effect: "You desire and you do not have, so you murder; you are jealous and you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight." Murder, then, becomes a consequence of desire that is not realized, rather than a constituent part of that desire. This mitigates the force of the argument for seeing murder as literal.

That last part of verse 2 contains a theme we have already seen (1:5). Here James must be expecting his readers to think in ultimate terms. What they want is not status, but rather what they hope status will bring to them: a sense of wholeness, joy, and peace. James asserts that believers do not have what they are seeking because they have been searching for it in alleys that are blind and in fields that are infertile. They should ask God, who gives wisdom (1:5), and this is a wisdom that results in wholeness and peace.

In Matthew 7:7 Jesus gave an unconditional promise that prayer would be answered. James in verse 3 makes explicit what Jesus left implicit: You do not receive because you ask God not for wisdom, but for selfish pleasures that by definition are not in the interests of the Christian community. Much has been made of the curious use of the middle and active voices in 4:2–3.[9] But the significant point is that the readers of James ask with the wrong motives, and therefore for the wrong things.

According to the Old Testament, God answered the prayers of the just, because they were offered in righteousness. Note Psalm 34:14–17:

> Turn from evil and do good;
> seek peace and pursue it.
> The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous
> and his ears are attentive to their cry;

9. Some see the middle voice as marker of the prayer of the heart and the active voice denoting the prayer of the lips. F. J. A. Hort, *The Epistle of St. James: The Greek Text with Introduction, Commentary As Far As Chapter IV Verse 7, and Additional Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 89, saw the middle voice as the designation of asking for something and the active voice designating the asking of a person.

the face of the LORD is against those who do evil. . . .
The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them. . . ."

James points out that the "prayers" his readers have offered are marked by their desire for "pleasures." The Greek word for "spend" here is *dapanao*, which here has a negative connotation, just as it did in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:13–14). The prayer was not answered positively because, in part, the prayer assumed a certain arrogance, the presumption that the one praying knew what was best. God's wisdom is often at odds with our own, and this was the case here. What is needed, of course, is patience and a willingness to be molded by God. These were evidently absent from James's readers.

The Bane of Compromise (4:4–6)

IN VERSE 4 James adopts the mantle of elder and offers a rebuke as to errant children. By designating them "adulterous people," he recalls a frequent Old Testament rebuke,[10] offers an echo of the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 12:39, and artfully holds out to his readers inclusion even as he wields the whip of chastisement. James is trying to shame them by reminding them of their commitment to the faith.

James's reference to friendship with the world closely parallels a phrase employed by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:4 ("lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God") and by John in 1 John 2:15 ("Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."). We are, then, in touch with a broad tradition. "The world" here assumes its semantic function as the forces and elements opposed to God, or, more precisely, the whole complex of human institutions, values, and traditions that knowingly or unwittingly are arrayed against God.[11]

Martin notes that the choice to be apart from God is deliberate.[12] While the grammar may support this, the thrust of James's argument does not. True, some choose friendship with the world in the full knowledge that this constitutes enmity with God, and some of these continue to maintain the facade of a relationship with the Christian community. Perhaps James suspects this of the teachers he opposes. But many choose friendship with the world without realizing that it means enmity with God. This is probably his chief point, for the phrase "adulterous generation" is always used in Scripture of those who assume they are in a covenant relationship with God. Why else would James seek to win them back by argument and then rebuke?

Like the prophets of old James wants his audience to wake up, rub the sleep from their eyes, look in the mirror (1:23), and see themselves as they really are. What has appeared to them as sound teaching and practice is actually apostasy. It amounts to the worship of a false god. There is no middle ground where one can stand and remain unsullied (1:27). To continue to follow this false teaching is no mere trifle; it is to join hands with evil. They have not sensed the dire straits in which they stand, and James sounds for them the warning klaxon.

Verse 5 presents at least two problems of interpretation. (1) What Scripture does James have in mind, for there is no Old Testament text to correspond to the quote. In the next verse James cites Proverbs 3:34, but this verse hardly suffices here. It is possible that we have here a loose paraphrase of Exodus 34:14: "Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." It is also possible that James here summarizes the many Old Testament passages that speak of the jealousy of God when the worship and ultimate allegiance on the part of human beings is in view. James's point is that God earnestly desires his spirit to reside in us.[13]

(2) This leads us to another problem: What is the subject and what is the object of the verb "longs for" (*epipothei*)? The NIV has chosen to muddy the waters by conflating two consecutive Greek terms, *phthonon* ("envy, jealousy") and *epipothei*. It is best to treat *phthonon* as an adverb ("with envy, with jealousy") and to see "God" as the subject and "the spirit" as the object of the verb. This leaves us with the following translation: "Out of jealousy he longs for the spirit that he made to live in us." This is the interpretation chosen by the NRSV (cf. NIV text note). Other renderings are, of course, possible and grammatically defensible. The subject could be the Holy Spirit, in which case the translation would be, "The Holy Spirit that he sent to live in us desires us for himself alone." This, however, leaves us not distantly removed from where we find ourselves if God is the subject.[14] In any case, the point is, plainly, that God

10. The premise of the book of Hosea is that the people of Israel have been adulterous (see also Jer. 3:7–10).

11. As we have seen, in Dan. 7 this is pictured as four beasts (human governments and institutions) that stamp on the earth and devour flesh, but whose dominion is taken away by the Son of Man in order to institute God's kingdom.

12. Martin, *James*, 148. He points out that the verb "chooses" (*boulomai*) implies a conscious choice. Of course people often make conscious choices in ignorance of the ramifications, especially if duplicity is involved.

13. In John 14:17 Jesus refers to the Spirit in him who will be in them once his crucifixion and resurrection are accomplished: "You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." In 14:23 Jesus speaks even more deeply of this love-relationship between God the Father, Son, and Spirit and with human beings: "My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

14. Note text note on this verse in NIV. The subject could also be the human spirit: "The spirit that he caused to live in us is one of jealousy and envy." This translation leaves us with the human spirit bent toward friendship with the world. This is not off the mark, but it does

desires with all of his heart for us to come home and to live with and in him, for us to ask for his wisdom. Instead, we follow the wisdom of the world, whether knowingly or unwittingly, and by following that errant path we can never achieve what we truly seek.

In verse 6 James holds out a lifeline to those who have apparently been ignorant of the gravity of their situation. God's grace, he says, is still available and abundant for them. God's demands can be harsh, but he always provides the means to follow him. This holds true even in the case of those active in cultivating a friendship with the world. James probably has in view a panoply of gifts, such as wisdom, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, salvation, Jesus Christ himself, and many others.

The Scripture James quotes here is Proverbs 3:34: "He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble." He uses this verse as the headwaters for a cascade of ten commands. Its thrust is that God opposes the proud because they seem to have little interest in anyone but themselves, often exploiting the poor; and that God grants grace to the poor and needy because they trust in him, having no other recourse (1:6, 12; 2:5; 5:8). In this case the proud and arrogant have already shown their stripes: They have demonstrated favoritism based on wealth and status as the Roman world demanded, and they have therefore unveiled themselves as the friends of that world and at enmity with God. Further, they have arrogated themselves the right to proclaim as faith a functional denial of the very teaching of Jesus, specifically the law of love.

Repentance and Forgiveness (4:7–10)

VERSE 7 OPENS a series of ten imperatives, or commands, built on the foundation laid in verse 6. These commands comprise James's recipe for humility before God. To "submit" (*hypotasso*) is normally used in reference to human authority, but the point is plain and the alternatives stark: "You may think you have been serving God, but you have not. Change, then, by submitting to God." The idea of submission carries with it the full range intended by the term *repentance*, which is not only a change of direction, but also a humble and contrite spirit. If this path is chosen, the response of God is forgiveness, as James has just reminded us in verse 6 ("he gives us more grace"). James then expands these points.

The first component of submission to God is to "resist the devil." The word "resist" (*anthistemi*) is the same one used by the LXX in Proverbs 3:34: "God opposes the proud." James flatly claims that Satan is the ultimate source of

seem to make less sense of the current trajectory of James's argument. Furthermore, the subject of the verb *katokisen* (to dwell) is God, and it makes the most sense for James to have the same subject for both verbs.

evil.[15] Perhaps he has employed this elaborate escalating technique (the *yeṣer ha-ra* in 1:14; Gehenna in 3:6; the demonic in 3:15; the devil here) in order to mirror the craftiness of Satan himself. The idea that the devil can be resisted is known in both Jewish and Christian thought.[16] Within the theology of the New Testament the power of Satan was severely curtailed at the Crucifixion/Resurrection, and it is possible that James has this in mind. The promise here is that with resistance, the devil will flee. Certainly the resistance of Jesus in the desert put Satan to flight, at least for a time (Luke 4:13).

The correlate to "resist the devil" is "come near to God" (4:8). As Martin wisely points out,[17] this coming to God is an act of contrition, not one of conversion. It involves the renunciation of all the practices and teachings that he has catalogued up to this point in the letter.

James has carefully laid the groundwork in the realm of general teaching concerning purity and evil. In chapters 2 and 3 he became specific. Now, having established this portrait of evil (unwholesome practice, teaching, origin, and goal), he commands renunciation while holding out the promise of gracious forgiveness. This he states in typically Jewish terms of washing and purity. The call of James is to a reorientation to God and his purposes in our world, purposes that touch on the social, cultural, and economic juggernauts with which human beings must reckon. The linkage of "hand" and "heart" is typically Jewish. The Psalms, for instance, frequently speak of the connection between inner disposition and outward acts (Ps. 24:4; 73:13).

"Sinners" is an interesting choice, as it was precisely these people with whom Jesus associated, much to the consternation of the religious authorities (Matt. 9:10–13). The word "double-minded" James has used earlier to describe the unstable who doubt God (1:8). Here it refers to those who try to live in two natures, one of the world and one of God. This sort of double allegiance is not possible.

To the admonition to cleanse themselves James adds obvious and perhaps even public acts of contrition (v. 9). The verb that opens this sentence, "grieve" (*talaiporeo*), is a common one in the Prophets (e.g., Jer. 4:8; Joel 2:12–13), used to convey the news that the time is one of great and imminent danger. The matters James has put on the table are not trifles. Similarly, the idea of changing laughter to mourning was used in Amos 8:10 to spark a sudden awareness of guilt and repentance. By such signs the prophets warned

15. See the discussion "Satan, evil, and trials" on James 1:2–11 (pp. 56–58), and the discussion of 1:13–15 (pp. 72–75).

16. The discussion of the armor of God in Eph. 6 includes the idea that against the powers and the spiritual forces of evil Christians can "stand their ground" when properly prepared. First Peter 5:9 also commands Christians to "resist" the devil.

17. Martin, *James*, 153.

of sudden catastrophe that the people had brought on themselves by their studied indifference to the poor and therefore to God as well.

In urging grief and a shift from laughter to mourning and joy to gloom, James reminds his readers that the false paths they thought would lead to true laughter and joy are dead ends and need to be abandoned. This abandonment must carry with it a recognition that the pursuit of these old false paths has not only grieved God, but endangered the Christian community and harmed many of their sisters and brothers. The recognition of such hurt carries with it an awareness of guilt and responsibility that are not appropriately mixed with laughter and joy.

The verb that begins verse 10, "humble yourselves" (*tapeinoo*), speaks not only of contrition and repentance, but also points to the penitent being in the presence of the Lord. By employing this word group both here and in verse 6, James has offered a clear stylistic clue to the unity of the passage. Humility is opposed to the attitude of reckless, arrogant indifference to God, which has characterized the instruction and practice of the false teachers. The promise of forgiveness is that God will then "lift you up" (*hypsoo*). This verb normally carries a metaphorical sense.[18] Those who followed the false teachers desired wholeness and joy. James points out here that in their true form these can only be found through humility before God.

James is no mere moralist. His thought, moral though it may be, is grounded in and supported by theology. In this section he reveals that his community was threatened by practices based on passions, by a capitulation to the standards and practices of "the world," and by pride. In response he has pointed out that following the passions only results in involvement in a ruthless and ultimately fruitless circle. The passions cannot lead us to our true goal, because they are essentially self-interested. He has also pointed out that one must choose between the world and God; there is no middle ground, and there must be no equivocation. Finally, he has made a case that pride is a feature of the standards of the world, and its antidote is humility.

Bridging Contexts

THE CENTRAL THRUST of this passage is aptly expressed in verse 7, "Submit yourselves, then, to God." In order to make this point James employs two devices that require some explication. The first is associated with the idiomatic expression "Come near"; the second is

18. It is a part of the enduring attraction and interest of the "spiritual gospel" that in John this verb bears a literal sense (see John 12:32, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself").

the meaning of the imagery of temple and sacrifice, which James calls upon in order to make his appeal.

Come near. With this phrase James taps into the language of eschatology, in which the phrase "come near" means "has arrived." When in Mark 1:15 Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is near," he means that with his activity the kingdom of God has begun to arrive. He does not mean that it is on its way. The point is made in Lamentations 4:18:

> Men stalked us at every step
> so we could not walk in our streets.
> Our end was near, our days were numbered,
> for our end had come.

The phrase is also used relative to sacrifice. To "come near to present the offerings" (Lev. 21:21) means being so close to the altar that a sacrifice can be offered on it. To "come near to God," then, is more than simply to resolve to improve one's spiritual life. It is fully to enter the presence of God, to reside there, to be comfortable there, to be at home. James uses this imagery because he wishes to remind his readers of God's longing to know them. The challenge is no less daunting, nor is the importance any less grave, as we consider the significance of this language and its meaning for the modern period. To "abide" in the presence of God, and for God to "abide" in us, as John's Gospel puts it, is the task before us.

Temple and sacrifice. When James says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:8–10), he is employing the image of the temple and the language of sacrifice. The Hebrews pictured repugnance to the pollution of sin in the moral realm in terms of aversion to dirtiness in the physical realm. The Old Testament temple ritual contained a double distinction that was rooted in this imagery of physical pollution: "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean" (Lev. 10:10). In the Old Testament the unclean was "that which disqualified a person from participation in worship, so that in effect he was debarred from the presence of God."[19]

Sacrifice was the process by which this barrier was eliminated. Items that were unclean were unfit for use by Jews.[20] Clean items were acceptable, and

19. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 17.

20. This seems to be the issue in John 4:9, where Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink. The text adds the comment, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." Whatever the verb (*synchraomai*) means, it cannot signify complete noninteraction, for the disciples have gone into Sychar to secure food. Many years ago David Daube argued that *synchraomai*

such items were divided into "the holy" (acceptable for and dedicated to God) and "the common" (acceptable for everyday use). Persons rendered unclean were not allowed access to the sanctuary and were therefore symbolically denied access to God. Sin relegated the offender barred from God's presence. In a passage replete with temple imagery, Isaiah expresses horror, for he has seen God and instinctively senses his own unworthiness and imagines impending catastrophe:

> "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."
>
> Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." (Isa. 6:5–7)

The stain of sin extended beyond the individual because the Hebrews recognized the communal nature of human existence. Sin, therefore, had the capacity to defile the very land of Israel.

> Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites. (Num. 35:33–34)

It is God's desire to live among his people, and together God and people form community. Defilement makes this difficult, if not impossible. The theological richness of the vista we have encountered here is such that associated with sacrifice are four ideas that express different but interpenetrating aspects of the role of sacrifice within Israel.[21] Each of them has bearing on this section of James: *community*, *offering*, *power*, and *commemoration*. In employing the images of washing, purity, and drawing near to God, James is building upon these ideas. His community was no community at all, but was fraught with divisions that needed to be mended. Sacrifice was needed to cleanse the community and effect this healing, and so James asks his readers to sacrifice their self-interest by submitting to God. James knows that the

means "to use together with" and therefore concerns issues of purity in the preparation of food (David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* [Univ. of London: Altone Press, 1956], 375–79; cf. his earlier article, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," *JBL* 69 [1950]: 137–47; see also John Marsh, *The Gospel of Saint John* [Middelsex: Penguin, 1971], 210).

21. This entire section is indebted to G. B. Caird and L. D. Hurst, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 150–52.

power to heal his community resides in God alone. He used the language of sacrifice to remind his community of this power.

(1) One of the more curious features of the Old Testament image of sacrifice was its connection to *community*. Sacrifice was an integral part of any ceremony celebrating the covenant between God and his people, for they were, collectively, *his* people.

> Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he opened the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."
>
> Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with these words." (Ex. 24:6–8)

Sacrifice, then, was a necessary precursor that pointed toward the essential unity of the people involved. The covenant was with God, but it was a covenant *of the people* as a whole, not only of the people as a collection of individuals. At this point it is easy to see why James chose the language of sacrifice. His community, ostensibly a "covenanted" community, evinced few of the hallmarks of such a community. They were a fractious, judgmental, and self-interested group of individuals. This sacrifice imagery was intended to remind them of the vision for community that resided in both the idea and the living reality of the covenant. They were invited not only to remember, but also in the present to experience the presence of God in and among them. In so doing they would gain God's wisdom, and in due time his peace and righteousness.

But sacrifice imagery also casts its influence into the modern period, for we are culturally far more enamored of individualism than were even the targets of James's rebuke. The challenge is to apply the message and meaning of sacrifice to our own day. Enamored as we are of individualism, evangelicals often find it easier to argue for structural change than to submit themselves to the hard work of learning to live together in community.

(2) *Sacrifice* was also a symbol of loyalty and gratitude to God, offered by his people out of gratitude for his forgiveness. The sacrifice was neither bribe nor payment, for the Hebrews were well aware that neither would be efficacious. The sacrifice was to be without blemish, a symbol of the desire of the penitent to be similarly pure. But even here there was a corporate dimension: "If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, he must bring to the LORD a young bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed" (Lev. 4:3). Here we see not only the forgiving nature of God, but also the influence of a leader. If the priest sinned, the stain of his sin could spread to the entire people. This was the darker side of community.

Just as in James's day there were leaders whose actions sullied the larger community, so today there are such leaders. To these leaders and to their followers God offers his forgiveness, trusting that in gratitude we will embrace it.

(3) The rite of sacrifice in the Old Testament was connected to the release and explosion of *power*, for blood stood for life. A passage in Leviticus demonstrates that certain offerings have the ability to render holy whatever comes into physical contact with them: "The sin offering is to be slaughtered before the LORD in the place the burnt offering is slaughtered; it is most holy. . . . Whatever touches any of the flesh will become holy" (Lev. 6:25, 27). In John 6:53–56 Jesus elaborated on this theme:

> Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him."

Here Jesus speaks of the power of his sacrificial blood to render holy.

In connection with this theme James weaves together a number of others. He points out that we do not receive from God when we ask, for we are asking for the wrong things (James 4:3). Last term a student approached me, aware only that I am a professor, and asked me for assistance on a mathematics problem. For as long as I can remember, mathematics has made as much sense to me as voodoo. Of me she was asking the wrong question. Her question proved that she did not know me. Similarly, our determination to ask God for the wrong things only underscores how little we know of God.

This realization, then, allows James to take us to the next step—a call for humility (4:6). The attitude of humility allows us clearer vision, to see our own need for God and to perceive his answer. Thus adorned, we are ready to enter his presence (4:8). It is important to note that purity is not required as a precondition. Purity systems often suffer from a dangerous misconstrual. In practice they tend toward the expectation of purity as a precondition for instead of the purpose of the sacrificial rite. "Unclean" becomes misidentified with "common."

It is for this reason that Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:12–13). Jesus here quotes Hosea 6:6, and in doing so emphasizes that sacrifice involves cleansing. There is no point in reserving sacrifice only for those already clean. Furthermore, sacrifice is not an end, it is a means to allow for

the development of godly character (here mercy as emblematic of the character of God) within his people. For our purposes the point is that forgiveness of God is available, no matter how sullied we find ourselves to be.

(4) In the annual Passover celebration, and particularly in the sacrifice associated with it, Israel *commemorated* her liberation from slavery in Egypt. It does not seem unjustified to see James urging his congregation to break free from the shackles of bondage to false wisdom that they have willingly but perhaps unwittingly taken on.

This idea of purity saw further developments within certain quarters of Judaism. The New Testament speaks of the "tradition of the elders" (Matt. 15:1–2), a purity system observed by the Pharisees that existed in oral form at the time of Jesus and was reduced to writing between A.D. 160–200 in a written document known as the Mishnah.[22] The Mishnah and therefore its precursor, the oral law, had as their object the "preservation, cultivation and application to life of 'the Law' (Torah). . . ."[23] There is a strenuous debate concerning the degree to which the Mishnah reflects the actual teachings and practices of Pharisees in first-century Palestine, and in fact what we can actually know about these Pharisees.[24] What we can say is that first-century Pharisees were interested in preserving holiness in part by preserving purity.

The oral tradition served as a first warning device, a barrier around Torah. Torah declares that no work is to be done on Sabbath. Mishnah asks the question, "What, precisely, constitutes work?" and answers it. To follow Mishnah means that the sanctity of Torah will remain intact. Of course, Jesus had little use for this tradition ("Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? . . . You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition"; Matt. 15:3, 6); he even had the temerity to break the Torah injunction concerning rest on the Sabbath. Jesus complained that in its desire to preserve the holiness of God, Judaism had excluded most of its adherents from drawing near to God for cleansing. Some traditions within the Judaism of his day failed to see that compassion, not purity as separation, is at the heart of God's character. The point for Jesus and for James is that drawing near to God need not be done only in a state of purity. Drawing near to God is done because of a desire and even a resolve to become and continue to live clean and pure before God. The heavy use of temple imagery in James 4 is designed to recall this practice of atonement.

22. Eugene J. Lipman, *The Mishnah: Oral Traditions of Judaism* (New York: Schocken 1974), 18.

23. Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated From the Hebrew With Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), xiii.

24. A good summary of the debate can be found in Jacob Neusner, "Mr. Sanders' Pharisees and Mine: A Response to E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*," *SJT* 44 (1991): 73–95. Sanders and Neusner are the most prominent of the partners in this debate.

Contemporary Significance

BY PRESSING INTO service the image of sacrifice and the language of drawing near to God, James has deftly pointed our attention toward forgiveness, community, and submission to God. It is in relation to this last that he counsels us to resist the devil. Many other themes in this passage have been discussed already (the pride and effects of false wisdom, the corrupting power of sin, leadership and the abuse of power), so that drawing near to God, forgiveness, and community will occupy our discussion here. But there is another reason. James has devoted a great deal of space to error within the church, and in this passage he discusses the forgiveness available to us. Therefore, coming near to God is the central thrust of the passage.

This passage implores us to draw near to God in order to be forgiven. The appeal is general, but especially it is directed to leaders within the church who are misusing their position and status. The "fights and quarrels" mentioned in verse 1 are the result of following internal desires, desires often in conflict with the purposes of God. As an antidote James advocates forgiveness. Forgiveness is a complicated business. Some of us find it difficult to forgive others, and some of us cannot, it seems, forgive ourselves. All of us need to be reminded of the love of our Father in heaven, who has forgiven us. Forgiveness also allows for the development of true community, which is James's hope here. Finally, James speaks of resisting the devil.

God is forgiving; he washes us clean. In his powerful and alluring novel *Atticus*, Ron Hansen offers a masterful retelling of Jesus' parable of the love and forgiveness that God lavishly bestows on us. Atticus, a sixty-seven-year-old Colorado cattleman, has two sons. The older son, Frank, is married and a state senator. The younger one, Scott, is brilliant but impetuous. Some years before, Scott had lost control of the family car on a winter day, and in the resulting crash his mother was killed. After spending some time in mental hospitals, Scott drifted to Mexico, where he led a scarred, profligate life. At Christmas he returns home, and in the midst of his father's inquiry about his life and activity, Scott says:

> I just *am* Dad. You've got one son who's a huge success any Father'd be proud of, and you've got one son who's a slacker and using up your hard-earned cash on just getting by from week to week. Hell, I'm forty years old. You oughta be used to me being a failure by now.[25]

25. Ron Hansen, *Atticus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 7.

Shortly after this interchange Scott goes for a walk and comes upon the vehicle in which his mother died. Atticus, growing concerned, looks for his son and finds him sitting in the car. Tenderly but painfully Hansen allows us to understand the depth of Scott's self-loathing, and part of the reason he believes he is beyond forgiveness.

> The milkwhite Thunderbird [was] just as it was sixteen years ago when Scott took Serena to the store. The high speed of the accident had destroyed one headlight and crumpled up the right fender and hood like writing paper meant to be thrown away. The right wheel titled on its axle as though it had not been fully bolted on, and the rubber tire shredded from it like black clothing scraps.
>
> Atticus walked around to the driver's side and opened the door. The iron complained at his pull but Scott did not look up, he stayed as he was, in his father's red plaid hunting coat, just sitting there, one wrist atop the big steering wheel, his right hand gingerly touching the windshield glass where it was crushed and spiderwebbed on the passenger's side. A milky light was filtering through the half-inch screen of snow. Atticus asked, "You okay?"
>
> Scott pressed his cold-reddened fingertips into a crack and said, "Wondered if her hair was still there. Crows must be nesting with it."[26]

Soon Scott returns to Mexico, and in an effort to escape his problems but with an astonishing lack of sensitivity to his family, he fakes his own suicide. He then watches from a distance as Atticus searches for clues in the Mexican village where Scott has lived.

> *You've put him through hell,* I thought, *again and again.* . . .
>
> I felt humiliatingly unequal to his faithfulness, his loyalty, his love, as if I were heir to some foreign genes that my father had no part in.[27]

Finally, however, the truth comes out, and Scott reveals to his father that he is, indeed, alive.

> I asked, "Will you forgive me?" And I felt forgiven even as I said it. . . .
>
> His shifty second son was there, found and alive, and if there was hurt in his face and he seemed to have visited every room in hell, it hardly mattered now; Atticus was flooded with joy. He's had his mind set on just one thing and got surprised by the far better.[28]

26. Ibid., 19–20.
27. Ibid., 227, 238.
28. Ibid., 240, 243.

To the great disappointment of Atticus, Scott seemed to express no interest in coming home to Colorado. Nearly a year passed, and then one day, the son returns.

> Looking for the flush of a second bloom from his wife's perennials, Atticus got his sheep shears and knelt in the garden in June, cutting back the penstemon, rockcress, stork's-bills, and daisies. A soft rain began to fall as he heaped the green clippings on gunnysack and hauled it out back to the compost pile, and then he heard a far-car on the highway. Why he didn't know, but Atticus walked to the front yard, taking off his gloves, and he saw a yellow taxi heading toward the house. And while his son was still a long way off, his father rushed out to greet him.[29]

In humility, James says, come near to God, and he will come near to you. As Atticus forgave Scott and wished only to lift him up, so God will forgive you, and he will lift you up.

Forgiving others. It is often difficult to forgive others, especially if someone has been the author of great personal tragedy. The relatives of murder victims tell television interviewers that they want the death penalty meted out. There is within us a bent to revenge and a desire for "justice" that is sometimes at odds with the gospel. Some months ago I was speaking with an old friend, and our discussion turned to his conversation with a mutual friend who had suffered a great personal tragedy at the hands of a criminal. My friend said, "I asked him how he felt about the perpetrator, and he said, 'I have forgiven him.' That is not natural," my friend added; "it is not normal." He is right.

In his book *Improving Your Serve*, Charles R. Swindoll tells the story of Aaron, a seminary student who took a job as a bus driver in order to pay his tuition. A small gang of "tough kids" got on his bus and refused to pay the fare. After several days of this behavior, Aaron spotted a policeman, pulled over, and reported the situation to the officer. The officer made them pay and got off the bus. A few minutes later Aaron was attacked by the gang. When he awoke, the bus was empty, blood was all over his shirt, two teeth were missing, his eyes were swollen, and his money was gone. Aaron decided to press charges. Swindoll continues:

> In walked Aaron and his attorney plus the angry gang members who glared across the room in his direction. Suddenly he was seized with a whole new series of thoughts. Not bitter ones, but compassionate ones! . . . After there had been a plea of guilty, Aaron (to the surprise of his attorney and everybody else in the courtroom) stood to his feet and requested permission to speak. "Your honor, I would like you to total up all the days of punishment against these men—all the time sentenced against them—and I request that you allow me to go to jail in their place." The judge didn't know whether to spit or wind his watch. Both attorneys were stunned. As Aaron looked over at the gang members (whose mouths and eyes looked like saucers), he smiled and said quietly, "It's because I forgive you."
>
> The dumbfounded judge, when he reached a level of composure, said rather firmly, "Young man, you're out of order. This sort of thing has never happened before!" To which the young man replied with genius insight: "Oh, yes, it has, your honor. . . . Yes, it has. It happened over nineteen centuries ago when a man from Galilee paid the penalty that all mankind deserved."[30]

Swindoll concludes that through personal pain and assault, Aaron learned the beauty of forgiveness, as God has forgiven us.

Forgiving ourselves. In the early to middle 1980s I worked with youth in the San Francisco Bay area. During one eighteen-month span I came to know several teenage women who had been the victims of sexual abuse as children. One young woman was Sarah. After I had known her for about a month, it became clear to me that she wanted to tell me something. She began to say that she had done something bad, so bad that God could never forgive her. I assured her that God always forgives. Over the course of a few weeks she told me of certain things she had done, none of which were startling. Finally, she revealed that as a child she had been sexually abused. The event was long past. The police had been informed, and the perpetrator, a relative, was in jail. But in her eyes she felt she was somehow responsible. "I must have done something to encourage him," she said. She also felt guilty for causing the imprisonment of a relative. She was absolutely certain, she said, that God could never forgive her for such evil.

Several years ago a young lady became dear to my wife and me. We first met Ruth when she was sixteen. Her parents had divorced when she was an infant, and she had just come to live with her father. It soon became clear to us that there was a deep shadow cast over Ruth's life, and before long she confided in us. Ruth had been sexually abused by a series of men in her mother's life following the divorce. The pain of these experiences had seared her. Like many victims of this most aggressive and twisted of evils, Ruth somehow felt

29. Ibid., 247.

30. Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve: The Art of Unselfish Living* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1981), 54–57.

responsible. What must she have done to deserve this? Had she somehow enticed these men? Was it all just a fantasy, and if so, what kind of person was she?

Ruth was a victim of what has been labeled Self-Inflicted Violence Syndrome (SIV) or Self-Mutilation Syndrome.[31] She would slash her wrists, purposely burn herself, or lacerate her legs. These were not attempts at suicide, nor, she said, were they cries for attention. In fact, she usually tried to hide her handiwork. Ruth suffered a form of self-induced mental torture; she simply could not get the emotional pain out of her mind. When this pain became too intense, she would mutilate herself, for this intense physical pain afforded a buffer, an alternative that crowded out her emotional pain. Over the space of seven years Ruth would begin and then withdraw from therapy, because therapy forced her to confront the memories and emotional pain. In the midst of this multiyear struggle, Ruth questioned the forgiveness of God. Ruth had committed her life to the Lord, but she harbored doubts that anyone, especially a God of holiness, could forgive her.

In my first year teaching at North Park I encountered a wonderful, bright young student. Mary was twenty-one, unmarried, and the mother of a four-year-old son. After seven weeks of class had transpired, she came to see me in my office. She wanted, she said, to "talk about God." I asked her what experience she had with the Christian faith. She told me that as a child she had attended a Christian after-school program, but that the pastor of the sponsoring church told her that the pants she sometimes wore proved that "she was evil," and Mary did not go back. As she told this story, she began to cry. If God considered her wardrobe "evil," what must he think of an unwed seventeen-year-old mother? She told me that she had been searching for God, praying to God that she might find someone with whom she could talk about God; but, she said, "I am so evil God does not listen to my prayers."

"Mary," I said, "what are we doing right now?" During the next hour I was able to assure her that God was a God of forgiveness and that he wants us to come near him so we can be washed clean.

In all three of the above situations, the women in one way or another expressed the difficulty of experiencing God's forgiveness. Yet it seems obvious to me that an equally difficult struggle was the ability of each to forgive herself of real or imagined guilt.

31. Bessel A. van der Kolk, J. Christopher Perry, and Judith Lewis Herman, "Childhood Origins of Self-Destructive Behavior," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 148 (December 1991): 1665–71; Beth S. Brodsdky, Marylene Cloitre, and Rebecca A. Dulit, "Relationship of Dissociation to Self-Mutilation and Childhood Abuse in Borderline Personality Disorder," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152 (December 1995): 1788–92.

Leadership and forgiveness. James lodges a stern warning in reminding us that friendship with the world is enmity toward God. This warning is addressed to those in leadership positions in addition to those who follow. In this fashion he links an overly healthy desire to accommodate with the world with the error of misdirected leadership. In his church, leaders had advocated that the sin of favoritism was not, in fact, sin, but that certain cultural norms were fully commensurate with the gospel. This position James attacked, even while offering to those preaching it, and to those seduced by it, the promise of God's forgiveness.

It is a sad commentary that the modern church is not bereft of parallels. Tom F. Driver, a one-time student of Paul Tillich, remembers his mentor: "I felt that his apologia was not addressed to unbelievers nearly so much as to persons like me who had been Christian all our lives and had now come to a time when we did not really know what Christianity was about, for it seemed at odds with our culture."[32] This, of course, is quite the point. The bane and blindness of liberal Christianity includes the assumption that there should be a warm joining of hands between culture and Christianity. But the Bible often compels us to stand for values radically at odds with those of our culture. To suppose otherwise is to misunderstand Scripture at the most basic level. As James says, "friendship with the world is hatred toward God" (4:4).

The bane and blindness of conservative Christianity is to assume that the only dangers are on the left. The shoals on the evangelical right can be those of zeal, of excoriation, or of numbness. In our zeal for truth, evangelicals often offer the spectacle of religious cannibalism, as we devour one another. The divisive battle current in the Southern Baptist denomination is a case in point.[33] Evangelicals are also guilty of a blanket excoriation of the world. "Friendship with the world" refers to embracing the standards of the world. But there are not infrequent points of correspondence. Christians should affirm what is true and worthwhile in our culture instead of offering churlish blanket condemnations.

Evangelicals are also prone to inaction. The atrophied silence of evangelical churches during the civil rights movement stands as a mute witness of shame. The biblical principles that evangelicals claim to hold so dear—the principles of righteousness and justice to which James gave voice when

32. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Public Square," *First Things* 70 (February 1997): 69.

33. Timothy C. Morgan, "SBC Targets Clinton, Disney, Jews," *Christianity Today* (July 1996), 66. Morgan quotes outgoing Southern Baptist Convention President James Henry Jr. as pleading for greater understanding and unity: "We as Southern Baptists are a diverse people. We must appreciate and appropriate this diversity for the common good." The comments of new President Tom Ellit were less conciliatory. See also Keith Hinson, "University Independence Sparks Renewed Tensions," *Christianity Today* (Feb. 3, 1997), 81.

he said, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (1:27)—were in large measure ignored. Instead we opted for the safe course of measured inaction, sanctioned by the winds of American political conservatism. We became "numb," to use Walter Bruegemann's phrase.[34]

We easily become "numb." In the prologue to his book *Whereon to Stand*, Daniel Berrigan writes:

> How bloodstained is our lifetime . . . [the] throwaway lives, the anonymous poor, the multitudes commonly considered of no worth . . . As for those who teach or preach or remain silent and so consent . . . we must speak of a crime, a sin.[35]

The journal *First Things* reports that a group of Episcopalian priests in Brooklyn are alleged to have imported young men from Brazil to engage in acts of a grotesque sexual nature. The story broke, predictably, in *Penthouse* magazine.[36] *Penthouse* quoted Long Island Bishop Orris G. "Jay" Walker, "If they were consenting adults, my position is that they were certainly free to take that action." *Penthouse* offered this bitterly ironic observation: These men became "playthings for priests whose commitment to the Scriptures had long ago been replaced by a pursuit of pleasure that would have fit nicely in Sodom and Gomorrah."[37] When *Penthouse* offers such a critique of Christian leaders, the situation is dark indeed.

A number of Episcopalian bishops have responded by issuing a statement called, "Where It Is Corrupt, Purify It." The statement alludes to the Richter trial, which concluded that the Episcopal Church has no "core doctrine" in the area of human sexuality; therefore, the ordination of active homosexuals violates neither the doctrine nor the discipline of the church. The ruling has sparked strong protest, particularly as the idea of "core doctrine" seems to have been created for this response.[38] The statement by the bishops also cites the long-term position of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Reverend Edmond L. Browning: "In this Church there shall be no

34. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 46.

35. Daniel Berrigan, *Whereon to Stand: The Acts of the Apostles and Ourselves* (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1991), xxiii.

36. A number of documents related to this issue, including the statement "Where It Is Corrupt, Purify It," are available at (http://www.episcopalian.org/EU/Press_Releases/index.htm).

37. *Penthouse* (December 1996), 42, quoted in the United Voice editorial "Penthouse Rebukes the Church," available at the website listed in note 36.

38. See the document "A Response to the Opinion of the Court for the Trial of a Bishop," available at the website listed in note 36.

outcasts." As the protesting bishops imply, this is a naive statement. The Bible certainly teaches compassion for all, but the Bible also teaches the corrosive power of sin.

The statement by the bishops offers this trenchant observation: "In a Church in which nearly half of the active bishops have declared their support—in principle—of the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons, we must not be surprised when some of their clergy take them at their word."[39] The statement by the bishops further issues a call for the Episcopal Church to "provide clear and binding standards regarding the sexual behavior of clergy." The bishops acknowledge that grave error has occurred and suggest an attitude of humility and a process pointing to forgiveness.[40]

In each of these cases, whether the sin involved is one of commission or omission, what is required, as James pointed out long ago, is humility—humility before God's will revealed in Scripture, humility before the Lord, and humility before others. The sacrifice of Jesus can wash us clean, if we will draw near.

Community. James 4:1–10 offers a strong call to community, and especially community created by a spirit of humility and forgiveness.[41] The Bridging Contexts section has demonstrated the critical significance of the need to create strong community, and especially of repentance and forgiveness as a means to establish such a community. Certainly the congregation to which James wrote needed such direction.

Our world is awash in facsimiles of true community. An avenue often attempted by evangelicals in America is that of reforming the state. In his warmly positive review of Guenter Lewy's *Why America Needs Religion: Secular Modernity and Its Discontents*, J. Budziszewski emphasizes a point that Lewy himself notes when he quotes from the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together": "To propose that securing civil virtue is the purpose of religion is blasphemous. To deny that securing civil virtue is a benefit of religion is blindness."[42] It seems odd that Lewy not only sees the need for religious underpinnings to effect a moral society, he even understands that it takes an active belief in God to animate these moral principles. When he began writing the book, Lewy writes, he was a "secular humanist" bent on demonstrating the

39. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Public Square," 71.

40. The question of homosexuality from a clinical perspective is insightfully treated by Elizabeth Moberly, "Homosexuality and Truth," *First Things* 71 (March 1997): 30–33. She points out that many recent studies on the biological origin of homosexual behavior are inconclusive. She advocates "respect for truth and respect for people" (33).

41. See the Contemporary Significance sections to 3:1–12; 3:13–18, pp. 188–202, 212–20.

42. J. Budziszewski, "Second Thoughts of a Secularist," *First Things* 72 (April 1997): 43.

superfluous nature of religious values. But in his research, he came to see the importance of these values and to eschew the label "secular humanist" for "nontheist."

Even so, Lewy points us in the right direction. Far too often evangelical Christians decry the paucity of moral values in this country and seek structural change. This may take the form of legislative action to bar certain kinds of medical procedures, or it may simply be idle talk about the need for prayer in the public schools. While these are not wrong-headed, they are incomplete answers. Ron Sider points out that evangelicals are "all over the waterfront"[43] on these issues. Evangelicals are zealous conservatives when attacking programs they do not like, arguing for limited government. "Then, when the issues change to abortion, euthanasia, and pornography, the same people loudly demand vigorous government action."[44]

Sider claims that evangelicals need to work out carefully the specific policy implications of biblical faith. We need, he says, an evangelical political philosophy. At this point I become nervous, for as we have seen, institutions, and particularly political institutions, while morally neutral, are easily co-opted by Satan and for this reason cannot blindly be trusted. Sider actually provides an example. The Reagan administration skillfully manipulated the American people over the question of school prayer during the 1984 campaign. In an effort to secure the vote of the religious right, the campaign

> decided to stage a fake drive to pass a constitutional amendment on school prayer. But first they asked a conservative senator to do a head count. When he reported insufficient votes to pass the bill, the Reagan staffer replied, "Good, we just wanted to make sure that it could not pass before we began the battle." The whole House then rallied the leaders of the Religious Right and promised to twist arms to pass the bill on the prayer amendment. But it was all a farce. Evangelicals did not understand either the politics or the substance of the issue.

Sider argues that evangelicals need to "articulate a view of government, human rights, the relation of church and state, democracy, private ownership and market economies, civil society (especially the family), and the like."[45] He is correct, as long as we adopt a biblical view of government. Government is not the body of Christ, nor can we expect it to be. When evangelicals confuse Christian faith with certain political interests, they are choosing

43. Ronald J. Sider, "Can We Agree to Agree?" *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* (January/February 1997), 27.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

friendship with the world over friendship with God. They are mistaking the possibility of an external framework for the deeper values that only the church of Jesus Christ can inspire.

Lewy's solution is one of externals—embracing the "morals" of religious faith without necessitating the living faith itself. Many centuries ago in ancient Israel such a code was developed; it may be found in the book of Proverbs, which offers sterling wisdom for the pragmatic and even boring realities of life. For example, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (Prov. 10:4). This is good advice, and it should be followed. But life at times confronts us with painful realities for which the book of Proverbs offers little salve.

A powerful example is the story of Job. As the story begins, Satan claims that Job fears God only because God has rewarded him for being so industrious. "You have blessed the work of his hands. . . . But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (Job 1:10–11). The challenge of Satan to God is whether or not there is any authentic faith in Job. There is no necessary impulse in the system enshrined in Proverbs to drive human beings into a living relationship with God. Such a system could, with profit, remain simply external.

Job's friends certainly seem to believe in this external cause and effect worldview of Proverbs: "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?" Eliphaz asks Job (Job 4:7). This view God found wanting. If tragedy strikes, the only cause Job's friends can conceive of is sin. Their world is simple: The good are blessed, the wicked are not. But life is not always so simple. Cicero once observed, "Laws bereft of moral quality are worthless."[46] Unless there is some set of deeply held beliefs that animate the moral character of law, the law and the moral system that law seeks to create remain external. The book of Job serves to remind us that religious mores are good, but without the living faith within, they are hollow if elegant shells.

Evangelicals must do more than work for structural change, for structures are weak and easily co-opted by Satan. The heart must change, for without these deeper values, the law is external. James implores us to draw near to God, not merely to adopt moral guidelines of which God would approve.

Resist the devil. When James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," he is aligning himself with solid biblical teaching. Satan can be resisted, primarily because he is weaker than God. I recall my Old Testament professor in seminary remarking that the entrance of the serpent in Genesis 3 is unspectacular when compared to the resplendence of God's activity in Genesis 1 and 2, because the Bible wishes to stress the overwhelming majesty of

46. *Leges sine moribus vanae.*

God. In the New Testament, as we have seen,[47] Satan's power has been vastly curtailed after the resurrection of Jesus. The rabbis also thought of the power of Satan as strong, but a power from which the study of Torah offered protection: "Raba said, Though God created the *Yetzer ha-Ra*, He created the Law, as an antidote [lit. spice] against it."[48] The question is, of course, whether the devil "flees" today.

As a young graduate student in the San Francisco area in 1981, I took a class on prayer from Robert Munger, the pastor emeritus of First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, and of University Presbyterian Church, Seattle. An essential element of the course was a time of prayer in small groups of three, in which we shared concerns and prayed for one another. After perhaps six weeks one of the members of my group of three missed a class. This left me alone with a woman in her mid-thirties. As we went off to pray, she told me a story that seemed to me fantastic. The night before, she said, she was awakened at 1:00 A.M. to hear her young son screaming in his bedroom. She rushed to his room, only to encounter what she described as a malevolent presence inhabiting the room and choking the life out of her son. She struggled against this presence, picked up her son, ran from the house, and she had not been back.

She then paused for several long seconds before adding, "I used to be a witch." She admitted she had been active with wiccans in the San Francisco area for many years before she became a Christian. In fact, over her fireplace mantle was hanging a macramé weaving of the zodiac symbol, the very one she had used as a part of her previous religious activity as a witch. She felt certain that this symbol was somehow involved. She then asked me, "What do you think I should do?" Realizing I was in over my head, I said, "I think you should tell this to Dr. Munger." In the weeks that followed, this woman told me that Dr. Munger had spoken with her, that they had prayed together, and that she knew that the devil had fled before the onslaught of prayer and her growing confidence in the presence and power of Christ.

In the opening pages of his book *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God*, David M. Paton many decades ago offered this sage commentary:

> But let our confidence be sober, and rooted in a Faith that knows all about Evil. Our world is one world—in God's design. . . . [My] father . . . said once that passing through Shanghai in 1935 had finally convinced him of the existence of the Devil, for in the appalling nexus of evil in Shanghai there seemed to him to be something at work

47. See the Bridging Contexts section to James 3:1–12, pp. 187–88.
48. *Baba Batra*, 16a.

> beyond what could be accounted for by the follies and wickedness of mankind.
>
> The Devil, then, must also be given his due. Mr. C. S. Lewis suggested in the preface to the *Screwtape Letters* that it is equally dangerous to our race to display either too much or too little interest in the Devil. Interested too deeply, we assign to the operations of the Devil events which can be adequately explained by common or garden sin, abnormal psychology and the like, and indulge in those orgies of witch-hunting which stain the history of the Church. Scornfully enlightened, and ignoring the well-authenticated phenomena of demon-possession (whether in the Gospel accounts of Palestine or in modern Africa or China), we allow the Devil a wider field for his operations by the very fact that we are off our guard. Both these attitudes are common; and not to be imitated. We may usefully preserve . . . that proper agnosticism without which there can be no true faith; only, if we allow for the operations of the Devil, let us be very clear that God is sovereign.[49]

Satan at times operates boldly and personally, at other times more slyly and through structures of power and authority. At still other times, such as in a cutting word unerringly directed, the fringe of his evil is felt; but this periphery points to the full weight of his malevolence. It must not be taken too lightly or too seriously, as Lewis has said. And it must be remembered that God is sovereign and that the devil will flee if resisted.

49. David M. Paton, *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God* (London: SCM, 1953), 15.

James 4:11–17

BROTHERS, DO NOT slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

13Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." 14Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. 17Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Original Meaning

HAVING ISSUED A call to repentance and forgiveness, James begins a short section in which he discusses a variety of problems within the community. The first problem is unwholesome speech in the form of name-calling and the spreading of lies. James counters this by showing how such behavior abrogates the law of loving the neighbor. The second problem has to do with an unhealthy fascination with making money, which James counters with a reminder that money is only temporary. What binds this passage together and to earlier ones is the power of the tongue, here understood primarily in the individual sense. The tongue can be used to slander others (vv. 11–12) and to boast of such empty things as wealth and status (vv. 13–17).

This passage divides neatly into two sections. In the first, the author argues in favor of a pure speech that does not condemn. He then turns his attention to the wealthy and offers teaching that extends through 5:6.

Pure Speech Does Not Condemn (4:11–12)

IN VERSE 11, James uses the term "brothers," binding himself to the church to which he writes. The verb the NIV renders as "slander" is *katalaleo*, which means "to speak ill of," though it can also carry the more narrowly focused meaning of speaking falsely. Whether this speech is false or true, James has

in mind harsh criticism and condemnation. Such verbal attacks were among the "quarrels and fights" referred to in 4:1–2.

There is no shortage of similar material in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament parallels can be found in the Pentateuch,[1] the Psalms,[2] and the wisdom tradition.[3] In the New Testament the term appears in several of the lists of vices (Rom. 1:30; 2 Cor. 12:20). But the clear foil is Leviticus 19:18, with its command to "love your neighbor as yourself." This command is "the law" referred to in this passage. James points out that anyone who speaks disdainfully of a sister or brother is, in fact, breaking this "royal law" (cf. 2:8). Continuing in such behavior is no trifling matter. It does more than break the law, it treats the law as if it did not matter, as if it were not in force. In short, it judges the law and finds it not worthy of adherence.

What is so keenly disturbing for James is the central place this command occupied in the ethical teaching of Jesus.[4] To ignore this command is, in effect, to repudiate Christ and to render the self-description "Christian" a falsehood.[5] This "speaking ill" of sisters and brothers is closely allied to the ill treatment of them in 2:1–7, and the flagrant refusal to follow the royal law recalls James's teaching in 2:8–13. The New Testament contains various injunctions against judging (Matt. 7:1–5; Rom. 2:1; 1 Cor. 4:5), but the reason given here, that judging breaks the law, pertains to James alone among the authors of the New Testament.

As in 2:10–11 James is not content to allow his case to rest on the meager foundation of the law itself. Rather, he discusses the law in terms of the personal authority of God, who stands behind the law (4:12). Here James is again in touch with a widely held tradition, that Christians should not judge others. Certainly this is a part of the Jesus tradition, for Jesus says in Matthew 7:1: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (cf. also Rom. 2:1; 1 Cor. 4:5). Only God has the right to judge, as he is the lawgiver. In the LXX Psalm 9:20 uses the term *nomothetes* ("lawgiver") to refer to the action of God. God alone, as Davids points out,[6] has authority over life and death (Gen. 18:25; Deut. 32:39), and only he has the ultimate power to save or to destroy (1 Sam. 2:6; Matt. 10:28).

According to James, when we judge others, we not only arrogate to ourselves what belongs to God alone, we also invite and pronounce judgment on ourselves. This is not meant to exclude honest and healthy discussion

1. See Lev. 19:16, "Do not go about spreading slander among your people."
2. See Ps. 101:5, "Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence."
3. See Prov. 10:18, "He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool."
4. See L. D. Hurst, "The Ethics of Jesus," *DJG*, 210–22.
5. See the discussion relative to "true membership" and the rich in James 1:2–11.
6. Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 170.

among believers, but it is to make clear a strong warning that the line demarking proper from sinful discourse is easily and often unknowingly crossed. James also points out that none of us is without stain, and we are deserving of the same judgment we so righteously place at the feet of others. It is possible that a part of the sting here is to avoid giving the church an unsavory reputation within the community at large.

Do Not Boast, For Tomorrow Is Uncertain (4:13–17)

IN VERSE 13 we have an example of the educated Greek style of James, as it begins with the construction *age nun*, translated by the NIV as "now listen." The construction is rare in the New Testament (found only here and in 5:1). It is common, however, in the world of Hellenistic literature.[7] The term is meant to convey tones of insistent and even brusque address.[8] While there is some debate as to the identity of the group intended by the phrase "you who say," there is no reason to suppose that James does not have in mind members of the Christian community.

Many argue that the absence of the term "brothers" indicates that James is now referring to some outside the church, but this is not as strong a position as is often supposed, for several reasons. (1) It makes little sense to argue that any outside the church would be interested in what James has to say on these matters. (2) James has already referred to members of the church in harsh terms without the designation "brothers." In 4:1–10 Christians were referred to by a variety of terms that are less than favorable ("adulterous people" in 4:4; in need of washing and purifying because they are "sinners" in 4:8). (3) James 4:15 contains the phrase "if it is the Lord's will," which is surely a marker that Christians are in view. In any event, we have here a group of merchants with some close tie to the church.

Verse 13 also contains a quotation; presumably James has heard that such statements have been on the lips of the merchants in the city. There is a potent Old Testament tradition of distrust of merchants and traders (Prov. 20:23; Mic. 6:11), but this does not seem to be the appropriate background here. Rather, the idea seems to be that the desire to make a profit has become such a towering priority that it has overshadowed everything else. This amounts to a smug certainty with no room for God. If this is correct, it recalls the merchants who, in the words of Amos, trample the needy as they anxiously await the end of the Sabbath so they can make more money (Amos 8:4–5). The parable of the rich fool, who relies on his stored wealth, also comes to mind (Luke 12:16–21).

7. See Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.2.20.

8. See James H. Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James*, 276.

James is not arguing against the making of money, or even against the desire to make money; rather, he is against the attitude of self-contained certainty, the same smug attitude that marked the teaching of the false teachers. Such certainty is revelatory of an attitude that does not take God seriously enough, a mind-set for which the making of money outstrips devotion to God in importance. The desire betrays friendship with the world and is, therefore, enmity with God. Beyond this, of course, is another sin, for many in the church have not seen the poor as their sisters and brothers. They have not shared with them, but have showed favoritism.[9] There is no discernible difference in their lives for having come to know Jesus.

At this point it is proper to ask about these traders and merchants. Davids[10] seems to think that they were in business at the local marketplace and had not yet become wealthy.[11] Rather, their plans were to build a fortune. But Laws[12] insightfully argues that these must be traders on an international scale, as the verb used by James (*emporeuomai*) indicates a distinction between the wholesale traveling traders (*emporoi*) and the local merchants (*kapeloi*). More significant is the allusion to traveling to other cities. As Gerd Theissen has pointed out,[13] travel was expensive, one of the markers of wealth of such magnitude as to warrant the attention of government officials.[14] Yet we know of several New Testament Christians with that kind of wealth. Chloe, for example, a female leader in the church in Corinth, had enough money to send some of her "people" with a message to Paul (1 Cor. 1:11). So the reference to travel and the considerable resources that such travel indicates do not necessarily preclude these traders from membership in the church.

9. The eminent sociologist Rodney Stark has recently published a book, *The Rise of Christianity*, in which he says that Christianity grew because of its theology—a remarkable assertion given the usual attitude of sociologists toward religion. Stark says that "Christians introduced into a world of hatred and cruelty a totally new concept about humanity—that you had a responsibility to be compassionate and caring to everyone" (see review in *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 1997).

10. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 170–71.

11. "Wealthy," of course, is a hopelessly inaccurate term, as what might appear to be a staggering fortune to a Galilean fisherman would be insignificant to an equestrian. Wealth was relative to location, status, and background.

12. Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 190.

13. Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, ed. and tr. by John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress 1982), 91–96.

14. Of course travel does not necessarily indicate the wealth of the traveler. But someone with wealth paid the bill. As is the case with so much else in the ancient world, the gaps in our knowledge about travel and its implications are disturbing. For example, why would Pliny feel the need illegally to secure an imperial travel permit so his wife could return to Rome on the occasion of the death of her grandfather? See Pliny, *Epistulae*, 10.45–46.

Verse 14 begins with *hoitines*, which means "you who are those who," and refers to the "you who say" of verse 13. In spite of all their careful planning (all the verbs in the quotation in v. 13 are in the future tense: "will go," "[will] spend a year there," "[will] carry on business," "[will] make money"), the future is uncertain. There is a clear connection to the rich in 1:10–11, who, in spite of their feelings of security, will be brought low. There James said that the rich and their riches will fade like a flower. Here the life of human beings can be compared to a mist that vanishes even as it is apprehended, with an ease and swiftness that takes the breath away.

The idea of the uncertainty of riches is universal, but Old Testament parallels are instructive. Proverbs 27:1 says, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." Hosea 13:3, in speaking of the people who have turned from God, says, "Therefore they will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window." These are the same images as in James: Making plans without considering God is evidence of idiocy, because life is transitory. The parable of Jesus concerning the house built on sand comes quickly to mind (see Matt. 7:24–27; cf. Luke 12:16–21; also Job 7:7, 9; Ps. 39:5).

For James the real question is how to approach life when the outcome is uncertain. His answer is to trust in God's graciousness, not in human plans. This is, in fact, one of the central messages of the Old Testament prophets. To trust in one's own devices is foolish in light of the fact that one can trust in God.

It is a great oddity that there is no clear biblical referent for the formula James records in 4:15, although the idea of the Lord's will pervades Scripture (e.g., Prov. 19:21). While the many close parallels in Greek and Latin literature[15] may betray a reference to the multiracial church, this is only supposition. This verse makes it clear that James is not against planning. Rather, James wants such planning to be given its proper priority, and none higher. God must be in control of such planning.

In verse 16, James sets limits on speech. He has already mentioned boasting: The poor may boast (1:9), and mercy boasts in the face of judgment (2:13), but the tongue should not boast (3:5). The merchants are not excoriated for the wealth they possess, or even for the pursuit of more. Rather, the rub is that they do so without reference to God, and they boast about it. As Laws observes,[16] the issue here is spiritual, not material or even (primarily) social. Boasting in our own accomplishments and/or in our own plans, on our own terms, is the issue. As long as God is not in control of such endeavors, boasting is evil.

15. See Plato, *Alcibiades*, 135D. In this passage Socrates says, "if it be God's will" (*boti ean theos ethele*).

16. Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 193.

Two points need to be made here. (1) The saying of Jesus regarding almsgiving ("So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full," Matt. 6:2) illuminates this passage. The attitude God desires is one that seeks his favor, not the praise of the world. (2) "Evil" is a strong word. Other less harsh words were at the command of James, yet he chose this one. Boasting is not for James a trivial matter.

This boasting is the sin mentioned in 4:13: The merchants plan and carry on as if God were unimportant or did not even exist. Instead, they should have made their plans in prayer and in the anticipation that God may in fact change these plans. They ought to be alert to the "new thing" that God may do. The merchants may be superficially pious in church, but their attitude if not their actions are boastful of their independence from God.

In verse 17, James shifts to the third person singular from the second person plural, indicating that he is quoting a proverb (as in 2:13; 3:18). Laws wonders how this verse connects with the others in this passage, but then she believes that the merchants are not members of the church. If, however, the merchants are members of the church, the connection is obvious, and James is saying, "Now that you know what is right, do it!"

James is possibly commenting here on Proverbs 3:27–28:

> Do not withhold good from those who deserve it,
> when it is in your power to act.
> Do not say to your neighbor,
> "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"—
> when you now have it with you.

However, there are similar sayings in a variety of sources from the ancient world. Ultimately, the precise identification of the source is not important. James here argues that sins of both commission and omission are grievous, especially when done knowingly. The making of plans as though the future is certain is itself a sin, because functionally it is a denial of God, either his importance or even his very existence. Then to boast about it is a further sin. James may perhaps be building on the saying of Jesus in Luke 12:47: "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows." Knowledge of right places us under a moral obligation to do right.

Bridging Contexts

THE TWO CHIEF issues in this passage are judging and boasting in wealth. Each requires clarification before application can begin.

Judging. In 4:11–12 are several variations of the idea of "judge," all of them forms of the Greek verb *krino* ("judge").[17] In the LXX *krino* is used to render three different Hebrew words: *šapat*, *dyn*, and *ryb*. This conflation lent to *krino* a wide range of meanings. The first word, *šapat*, can mean both "to judge" and "to rule." The second one, *dyn*, can mean "to judge," "to punish," and "to obtain justice for someone." The third one, *ryb*, can mean "to quarrel" and "to carry out a lawsuit."

In ancient Israel justice was about more than adherence to some abstract moral standard; it also included fidelity to a sense of peace and health within the community. Sometimes this meant that the wealthy were expected to sacrifice in the interests of the poor. Also in ancient Israel, all justice was attributed to God; he is the Lord and judge (see Deut. 1:17). God judges the nations, and on the "day of the LORD" he will destroy all ungodliness (see Isa. 2:12, 17–18).

In the New Testament *krino* and the idea of judging can mean "to approve," "to distinguish," and "to consider." But the term can also possess a forensic meaning, such as "to judge," "to condemn," and "to punish." The question of humans acting as judges is not without controversy in the New Testament. On the one hand, Paul says that the apostles and the church have a responsibility to judge. When confronted with serious sin within the congregation, he wrote: "What business is it of mine to judge outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you'" (1 Cor. 5:12–13). Elsewhere Christians are commanded to exercise judgment in spiritual matters: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

On the other hand, there are frequent commands to avoid judging others. Jesus said, for example, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matt. 7:1–2). Paul likewise records this sentiment when in Romans 2:1 he writes: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."

17. See W. Schneider, "Judgment," *NIDNTT* 2:362–67.

Clearly we are dealing with two different issues. There is an injunction to avoid judging, but there is also the command to display judgment within the church. In fact, even James's warnings about judging are a form of the very judgment he seems to condemn. What is the path out of this problem?

In both Testaments all judgment is assigned to God. Judgment on the part of human beings, therefore, is lodged within the wider context of God's judgment. God assigns to Jesus the task of judging. Jesus is God's representative, though the authority to judge rests with God.[18] When Jesus says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," he is reflecting the awesome and fearful nature of the task. To the church God has delegated the task of judging in matters that affect its members. For this reason James and Paul can and do judge. However, they remind us that in judging we are acting in God's stead, and therefore exceptional care and restraint must be observed. God does not take it lightly when his name and honor are invoked inappropriately. To render judgment in the flippant, arrogant, and harsh fashion that some in his church have been doing, James finds reprehensible and foolhardy. God will defend the cause of those maligned.

In summary, three points are prominent. (1) God alone has the right to judge. He is the lawgiver, the author of justice and righteousness. (2) God at times delegates that responsibility. He delegated it to Jesus, and in certain functions he delegates it to us. When exercising this role, however, we serve not as our own agents, but as the representatives of God. In some areas we are commanded to judge, such as in the case of spiritual discernment. But in all such areas we are to judge not in accordance to our own foibles and proclivities, or even according to personal convictions, but only in concert with the standards of God. This is the only true template. (3) We often judge inappropriately. When we use slander, misinform for ulterior motive, or seek what appears to our eyes to be "the good," we are doing more than sinning against our neighbor. We are breaking trust with God; and in so doing, we are, in fact, judging ourselves. We demonstrate our lack of understanding of God our Father, and we place ourselves in jeopardy.

Merchants and traders. An unfortunate reality of the study of ancient Mediterranean history is that so little can be known about traders (*negotiatores*). What little we do know comes from disparate sources, principally occasional references in literature and citations in tax codes. The various codes all leave

18. The Gospel of John clearly adheres to this pattern. God is the judge (cf. 8:50, where Jesus says, "I am not seeking glory for myself, but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge"). John also argues that Jesus has been delegated the authority to judge by God, for in 5:22 Jesus says, "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son." That Jesus judges in fidelity to God's appointment is affirmed in 5:30, when Jesus says, "I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just."

this group ill-defined, but generally they include all who made their living buying and selling, such as merchants, shopkeepers, moneylenders, and prostitutes.[19]

For many years a tax existed on traders, the *collatio lustralis*. Both pagan and Christian sources speak of it as a terrible burden.[20] When outlawed, its place was taken by rents on imperial estates. We can only deduce that the imperial *coloni*[21] far outnumbered the traders. We do know that the demand for most goods was low. After all, the vast bulk of the population often had trouble securing sufficient food. Most of the goods needed were manufactured locally, with the peasant population making virtually everything that was needed in their own homes. There were exceptions, such as the fabric industry, for which, as one might expect, the production facilities were located near the wool and cotton growing lands. Most local elites had their need for cloaks, shoes, and other items filled by traveling salespersons. Such traders rarely became rich, except by the standards of the poor. A trader in the Spanish market, for example, left an inheritance to his family of seventy pounds of gold.[22] This was a great sum by local standards. But a senator of even modest means might expect income of one thousand to fifteen hundred pounds of gold annually.

Such traders were not trusted and were commonly considered to be inveterate liars. Proverbs 20:23 says, "The LORD detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please him." Micah says, "Shall I acquit a man with dishonest scales, with a bag of false weights?" (Mic. 6:11). For these reasons traders were usually barred from the decurionate (the local city government). Callistratus tells us that it would be disgraceful for traders to be elected to the decurionate because it is likely that they will be flogged.[23] In summary, there were few traders, but they did exist, often traveling for long periods. The wealth they could amass was little compared to the decurions. But in the eyes of the poor they were both rich and august.

The Roman economy was essentially agricultural, with trade comprising a fraction of the total gross production. The fact that the tax on traders could be replaced by rents on the imperial estates demonstrates not only the limited number of traders, but the relative unimportance of trade in the Roman economy. In this world traders held a position of low status, except in relation to the poor. It is possible, therefore, that some of these traders may have

19. See A. H. M. Jones, "The Economic Life of the Towns of the Roman Empire," *The Roman Economy*, ed. P. A. Brunt (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 35–60.

20. Libanius, *Orationes*, 46.22.

21. The term *coloni* signifies free peasants who were legally tied to the land.

22. Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 15.

23. Callistratus, *Digest*, 50.2.12.

joined the Christian movement in part because it afforded the opportunity for status and display of wealth denied them in Roman culture at large. Certainly the complaint of James indicates that the interest of these traders was self-directed instead of directed toward the church.

Our world is quite different. In Chicago, where I live, thousands make their livings trading products that do not even exist yet. At the Chicago Board of Trade millions of dollars are made and lost speculating on the future price of orange juice or pork bellies. To trade in the price of imagined products would have been inconceivable to James. In spite of this difference, however, there are similarities. Like those early traders, we can and do boast in and rely on our standing in terms of public opinion, our reputation, our wealth, the security of our jobs, and countless other false foundations.

Contemporary Significance

THE CHURCH TO which James wrote had adopted as their own a philosophy that was errant and misguided. In this passage James points out two manifestations of this aberrant philosophy: Christians were given to judging one another without considering that God delegated that authority to them, and they boasted in their own strength and resources.

Impious judging. Five days after I graduated from college, I joined the staff of a large church on the San Francisco Peninsula, just north of the Silicon Valley. Friends, relatives, and even strangers, when they learned of my place of employ, offered some variation of, "It must be great to work at a place where everybody gets along, where everybody trusts each other, where there is no political maneuvering." It took little time for that fantasy to evaporate in the hard light of experience. It is unfortunate, but true, that the contemporary church is no less immune to the virus of slander, ill-talk, and harsh criticism than the church to which James wrote so long ago. We find ourselves, as Luther said, *simil iustus et peccator*, "at once justified and sinful."[24]

During the next fifteen years as I served in local churches, I witnessed astounding acts of Christian devotion and selfless service done with integrity and sacrifice. But I also witnessed evidence of another kind. Early on I watched as a plot hatched by some volunteers was set in motion. Their plan included ill-talk, half-truths, and misinformation concerning a pastor, which eventuated in his removal. They executed their strategy with precision and granted to it a veneer of spirituality, claiming to be acting "for the good of

24. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Concordia: St. Louis, 1972), 258–60 (v. 25 of *Luther's Works*).

the church." These volunteers were privy to various planning meetings and virtually all the decisions made by the pastor in question, never disagreeing with him openly. But as soon as the meetings were over, they spread their vitriol to others. Questions were raised in secret about the wisdom of the decisions made, and subtle hints were left concerning the misuse of funds. These "charges" were without foundation, but the effect was the same.

There are even more egregious examples. I know of a case in my own denomination in which men and women in local church leadership falsified official minutes of the church and lied to the annual meeting of the congregation about others in the church. Their rationale? That although the church had voted for a certain position, the decision was a poor one, and this, they felt, justified their arrogating to themselves the right to work against the position taken by the church. To do so they were compelled to act in ways that maligned others. When finally confronted, they protested pure motives, if not righteous actions. No one wants to believe that this can happen in the church, but it does.

Such deviousness is not limited to the local church. My own denomination is a case in point. The Evangelical Covenant Church in America was founded by Swedish pietist immigrants. To this country they brought a robust belief in the authority of Scripture and a commitment to the essential nature of the experience of new life in Christ. But in the early 1900s growing tensions within the denomination became clear. Over the years harsh, unkind, and untrue words were spoken and written. Each side was certain that it stood with the angels, and each was certain that the very soul of the denomination was at stake. Feelings were hurt, careers damaged, and untold misery experienced by family and friends. One of the principal players in the controversy wrote that at the time the convictions and actions of both sides seemed noble and pure, but in retrospect "some of us . . . displayed a regrettable party spirit. I confess that I carry my full share of guilt for the unwarranted apotheosis of something which, in the words of Nietzsche, was 'human, all too human.'"[25] We have the capacity to speak ill-considered and even slanderous words about each other within the church, even though we know that James says such behavior only brings condemnation on our own heads.

There are, I think, several steps we can take to avoid this pitfall. (1) *We must remember that the end does not necessarily justify the means*. Near the end of his life Cicero witnessed the destruction of what he considered the best of Roman civilization, and he bitterly said, "When you are no longer what you

25. Karl A. Olson, "The Covenant Constitution and Its History," *Narthex*, 3/1 (February 1983), 11.

were, then there is no reason left for living."[26] It is possible "to win," as had Cicero's enemies, but at the terrible price of character and integrity. There are times when our desire to see a goal come to fruition so overwhelms us that the process of its achievement nullifies its effect.

Few questions are as important to the church of Jesus Christ as that of leadership. One of the truly discouraging features of my coming to maturity was the realization that in church politics the end often seems to justify the means. Mike was a young intern serving as a youth director at a church. He was recently married and set to attend seminary in the fall. He planned on resigning in May so that he and his new wife could move across the state and spend the summer settling into marriage and familiarizing themselves with the town that would be their home for the next three years. Mike's supervisor knew of his plans, but did not want to interrupt his own vacation schedule in order to conduct a search for a replacement. So he convinced Mike to stay until a week before classes began. His motive was selfish, although he told Mike it would be "better for the kids." His lie was convenient for him, but not for Mike. He abused his position, and although the stakes were not high, this abuse revealed something of a double-minded heart.

Recently a good friend of mine, a regional official for his denomination, told me a sad story concerning the administrator to whom he once reported. This administrator is gifted in many ways, and my friend has tremendous respect for her. But she had made some enemies among those who viewed her as an interloper. From my friend's perspective this woman had done a great job, but the reaction against her had taken the form of a well-organized cabal. Several prominent persons within the district had decided to have her removed from office. They made charges that they believed were true, but many of which were without foundation. They misled some of her support staff and misused the information gained thereby. In their eyes it was essential for "the good of the district" that she lose her position. But the process they chose, one of duplicity, subterfuge, and misrepresentation, was not worthy of the cause of Christ. The goal before their eyes must have seemed to them so pure and rarefied, but the path they chose to reach it sullied and polluted not only the goal, but themselves.

(2) *Stretch for biblical open-mindedness*. Hindsight, the saying goes, is always 20/20. James has implored his readers to repent. To him the need for repentance was obvious. To his readers it was not so. There is something about faith that tends toward certainty. But certainty can be dangerous when it makes us blind. Jesus, like James, tried strenuously to open the eyes of his contemporaries to see their need for repentance. He implored them, "Stop judging

26. Cicero, *Ad Familiares*, 7.

by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24). In no uncertain terms he warned them, "Woe to you, blind guides!" (Matt. 23:16). In frustration he said to them, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (John 9:41).

History teaches that we are foolish if we imagine we are immune from the same tendency. What ensures the honesty and integrity of our faith and practice is, in part, a healthy biblical self-critique. Paul says that, in a flash, he came to realize that his trust in the law was actually a form of idolatry that had prevented him from seeing the light (Rom. 10:1–4; 2 Cor. 3:7–4:6). Peter persisted to maintain a practice of separation from Gentiles until the vision recorded in Acts 10. Both were open to self-critique against the standards of Scripture and the Spirit. Such critique involves the courage and integrity to attempt to discern the wisdom of other positions. Above all, it means to test our own convictions, as well as those of others, on the anvil of the biblical witness.

Several years ago a good friend of mine, who as a young man became a millionaire in the clothing business, reported to his friends that his life had been transformed by reading John F. Alexander's *Your Money or Your Life*.[27] It convicted him concerning his use of money and God's call on his life. God sometimes speaks to us, as he did to Paul, through the careful consideration of a position we do not hold. We must remain open to his leading. We owe it to ourselves to read and to study positions taken by other Christians, remembering to evaluate them on the basis of the biblical record and in light of the Spirit.

(3) *Commit to personal integrity and biblical fidelity*. Debates concerning women in ministry, the ordination of practicing homosexuals, leadership styles, and the merits of leaders are often politically charged and highly emotional. Frequently there is little reason attendant to the debates and often a lack of civility. James begs us to commit to personal integrity and biblical fidelity.

Let us not "win" at the sacrifice of our principles. Integrity means that we are willing to say in public what we say in private. "I am going to tell you something that he said, only I need you to keep it confidential" is a seedbed for Satan to do his work. Remember, when we judge, we do so as God's designated agents. God will not brook falsehood, misleading, or duplicity. We may "win," and in so doing wreck carnage on our victim, and yet be certain that the cause is just. But such a victory is pyrrhic and tainted, and it will be the cause of our own condemnation.

27. John F. Alexander, *Your Money or Your Life: A New Look at Jesus' View of Wealth and Power* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

The idiocy of boasting in the uncertain. When James counsels us that tomorrow is never certain, he is right. The ancients knew this and spoke of capricious fortune that governed the lives of women and men. Perhaps the most ready examples of the unpredictable winds of life are those involving finance. Americans are fascinated with money, and particularly with financial abundance. There is something more than a desire for financial security at work here. We are intent on affluence. Our culture is captivated with wealth, with its acquisition and display. In this regard we are not too far removed from the traders whom James knew.

Infomercials crowd the television channels on the weekends, featuring testimonials from former wage earners who, after a short correspondence course, became millionaires buying real estate with no money down and working only ten hours a week. The complimentary airline magazines are replete with video courses offered by financial and success "gurus" who promise easy money. Millions flock to Atlantic City and Las Vegas every year, hoping for a big score. The advertising industry fuels this malady, as everything from luxury cars to recreation and vacation options, clothing, homes, cigarettes, kitchen cabinets, and top-of-the-line toilet tissue is hawked, with the emphasis on wealth and luxury. In case some little-used corner of our conscience is disturbed by this self-interest, the advertisers assure us that we deserve and need such opulence.

This is a twisting of the American dream. In the movie *The Jerk* we are exposed to a comedic dark vision of the American dream. Steve Martin plays a penniless simpleton who travels to the city, accidentally invents a hot-selling product, and thereby becomes a millionaire. But the product proves to have adverse physical effects, and soon the character played by Martin loses everything. This rags to riches to rags story parodies the American dream that any of us can become rich. But it also points out the transitory nature of financial wealth.

In the first place wealth is not easy to acquire. It is true that the American social and cultural landscape is studded with success stories that like of the billionaire H. Ross Perot. It may even be possible to become a millionaire buying real estate with no money down, but as James reminds us, this is not the point. Financial affluence is like the mist; it can disappear even as we grasp it. The wise person does not make his or her finances the bedrock of personal security. Only God deserves that status. But this requires honest evaluation of our own lives and priorities. God does not desire to be a mere ornament clinging desperately to the surface of our lives.

Of course, for most Americans financial affluence is beyond the realm of possibility. During 1996 pay and benefits for US workers rose by an average of only 2.9 percent, according to the Labor Department. The AFL-CIO notes

that in 1965 the average CEO made forty-four times the average salary package of the average worker. In 1996 the difference was two hundred times.[28]

Not only is wealth difficult to accumulate, but it is equally difficult to maintain. I once knew a real estate mogul. He was a Christian and served on the deaconate of his church. When video tape technology was set to become widely available to the American public, he made two crucial decisions that together were the equivalent of risking his financial health. Both turned out to be mistakes. The first was to risk a good portion of his wealth buying stock in a "sure thing" electronics firm, which turned out to be the opposite. The second involved a major deal to develop a large tract of land. Everyone said his plan was brilliant. The land in question was ideally located, and the timing seemed perfect. A year after he purchased the land, the value had doubled. But soon a horrific series of events began to transpire. Legal problems concerning title arose, serious environmental questions were posed, and several of his partners backed out. The deal collapsed around him. In both he suffered huge losses. The enhanced financial security for which he hoped, which everyone said was a foregone conclusion, easily within his grasp, dissipated like the morning mist, disturbed by even the lightest of breezes.

Investors in foreign markets take no fewer chances. In his review of the book *Kremlin Capitalism*,[29] Robert Cottrell points out that years of communist rule have left managers and workers woefully unprepared for the essential savvy needed in a market economy. Instead of selling the majority of shares in an industrial enterprise to an "investor who would bring the entire amount of capital necessary to modernize and restructure the firm" in order to make it healthy, most Russian managers and workers prefer to maintain ownership of an increasingly outdated plant. Such behavior the authors label as "suicidal."[30] There are other dangers to investing in Russia. "In 1995 alone the Russian Business Roundtable, an organization of leading executives, lost nine of its top thirty officials to assassins."[31]

Sadly, many in Christian ministry betray the same smug certainty in wealth and position. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and their PTL (Praise the Lord) ministry are a case study in the virulent spread of the desire for and false assurance in financial security. Most of the Bakker's close associates were caught in a web of expanding lies, all set in the context of a ministry that once was viable. The desire for money perverted Bakker and his closest associates

28. *Chicago Tribune* (May 11, 1997).

29. Joseph R. Blasi, Maya Kroumova, and Douglas Kruse, *Kremlin Capitalism: The Privatization of the Russian Economy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996).

30. Robert Cottrell, "Russia: The New Oligarchy," *New York Review of Books* (March 27, 1977), 28.

31. Ibid., 30.

in a fashion that was not only thorough, but also subtle enough that they did not recognize their own infection until it was too late and thousands of innocent, trusting people had suffered, as had the reputation of the church of Jesus Christ. Neither Bakker nor his associates ever dreamed that their world of affluence could dissipate so quickly and completely.

In his surprisingly sympathetic review of the newest books by Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye Messner,[32] Martin Gardner catalogues the sad story of a Christian minister seduced by the limelight and money, and the rapid spread of this infection. Richard Dortch, Bakker's co-pastor, who paid Jessica Hahn $363,700 in hush money, was sentenced to eight years in prison and fined $200,000. Another of Bakker's top assistants, David Taggart, and his brother James, PTL's interior decorator, were convicted in 1989 of tax evasion to the tune of $500,000. Each was sentenced to seventeen years in prison. Jim Toms, Bakker's friend and attorney, pled guilty to embezzling $1.4 million from his clients. Roe Messner, Bakker's friend, contractor for the defunct Heritage USA Christian theme park, and current husband of Bakker's ex-wife, was indicted by a Wichita, Kansas court for hiding $400,000 from the government when he declared bankruptcy in the aftermath of the PTL scandal. The desire for wealth cloaked itself in the guise of authentic ministry and proved a deadly foe.

Gardner writes that while Jim Bakker was in prison, he came to understand that his "health and wealth" gospel was wrong. Gardner quotes Bakker as saying, "To my surprise, after months of studying Jesus, I concluded that He did not have one good thing to say about money. . . . I had to face the awful truth that I had been preaching false doctrine for years and hadn't even known it!"[33] Gardner continues that Bakker no longer believes the frequent justification Tammy offered for their material luxury: "We were worth it."

Of course, the other factor is what people everywhere think wealth will get them: happiness. A recent survey asking this question of Americans, "What will make you happier," yielded 32 percent who answered, "If I were smarter," and 48 percent who said, "If I were rich." This is one of the great false beliefs of our time. University of Illinois psychologist Ed Diener and his colleagues surveyed forty-nine of the wealthiest Americans (according to the listing in *Forbes* magazine). They reported only slightly higher levels of happiness than is the average among all Americans. Of these forty-nine Americans, each with a net worth over $100 million, 80 percent agreed with the statement that "money can increase *or* decrease happiness, depending on how it is used." Many of those surveyed said that they were basically

32. Martin Gardner, "How He Lost It," *The New York Review of Books* (May 29, 1997), 29–32.

33. Ibid., 30.

unhappy, and one of these enormously wealthy persons reported that he could never remember being happy.

In 1957 the per capita income in the US, expressed in 1990 dollars, was $7,500; in 1990 it had doubled to $15,000. Yet in both 1957 and 1990 only 33 percent of those surveyed by the University of Chicago National Opinion Center said that they were "very happy." We are twice as wealthy, but no happier. In fact, between 1956 and 1988 the percentage of Americans who reported that they were "pretty well satisfied" with their financial situation actually dropped from 42 percent to 30 percent. Wealth does not bring happiness.

Erno Rubik, the inventor of the Rubik's cube, was transformed by the success of his product from a $150-a-month professor to the richest person in Hungary. Yet when he was showing an interviewer through his new mansion, replete with pool, three-car garage, and a sauna, the interviewer noticed that there was no dining room. "Do you plan to have many people over for dinner?" Rubik was asked. "I hope not," was his reply.[34]

The unexpected can bring sudden wealth, as it did for Erno Rubik. But more often, it seems, the unexpected brings not good news, but bad. During the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, when the Athenians had suffered an unforeseen blow, Pericles spoke to them, saying, "When the unexpected happens, suddenly and against all calculations and well laid plans, it takes the heart out of you. . . ."[35] When the unexpected happens, we too are shaken. We rely on wealth, yet the stock market crash of 1987 wiped out a man I knew who was only six months from retirement. We rely on the security of our jobs, yet the "peace dividend" occasioned by the collapse of the Soviet Union led to Lockheed laying off more than 20,000 of its 30,000 plus employees at its Sunnyvale, California plant. We rely on a myriad of resources that are, in the words of the Bible, only mist. Life is unpredictable, James says, and we are foolish if we rely on anything other than God.

For Christians to rely on anything other than God is to lack integrity; it is to be double-minded. Integrity is what James is aiming at. Our world seems bereft of integrity. Tobacco companies maintained for decades that they had no knowledge that nicotine was addictive, but in March of 1997 one company admitted what the rest of us suspected for years: The companies knew the addictive properties of nicotine and lied to the rest of us. The pursuit of wealth, apparently, was more highly valued than truth.

Countries fare no better. While claiming to stand for human rights and publicly declaring abhorrence at the massacre in Tiananmen Square, the government of the United States continues to extend Most Favored Nation Trading Status to the People's Republic of China.[36] But this gulf is really an extension of the gulf within the human soul. We are torn, one way by the *yeṣer ha-ra*, another by the *yeṣer ha-tov*. And yet James implores us to be *integrated* people, consistent, marked by integrity, and mature. How is this accomplished?

In his slender volume *Shaping Character*,[37] Arthur F. Holmes outlines a course of action with the intended result of creating ordered minds and hearts within us, alert to the leading of the Spirit and to the teaching of Scripture. Holmes points out that ethics has been marginalized in our culture, and that most Americans display a functionally relativistic attitude: "It is right for me, but it may not be right for you."[38] In response Holmes outlines eleven steps in the development of this integrated Christian moral identity.

- *Consciousness raising*: becoming aware of the wider world outside ourselves, the pain and suffering of others, the systemic abuses that are the manifestations of Satan's continued perverse influence over our world.
- *Consciousness sensitizing*: feeling compassion for those caught in the web of this evil.
- *Values analysis*: understanding the values that nations, companies, and other people have and which in practice shape their behaviors.
- *Values clarification*: becoming aware of the values that we as individuals and organizations functionally embrace.
- *Values criticism*: asking ourselves hard questions concerning these values: Are they the ones that ought to be operative in our individual and corporate lives?
- *Moral imagination*: thinking in universal terms in order to construct a moral framework based on biblical principles.

34. For these examples see David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who Is Happy and Why* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 40–42.

35. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.61.

36. President Clinton promised while campaigning for the presidency to do his best to address human rights violations in China, but on May 28, 1993, he abandoned that promise, claiming that economic engagement with China would improve the positions of all. This has proven to be a hollow position. At least the Reagan administration's position vis-à-vis South Africa did assist in the end of apartheid. No parallel development is in the offing in China.

37. Arthur F. Holmes, *Shaping Character: Moral Education in the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

38. The work of sociologist James Davison Hunter seems to bear this out. His research has led him to two conclusions. (1) Most Americans believe in God and the existence of absolutes. (2) Most Americans do not feel it is appropriate to impose a universal set of moral principles on others. This split Hunter attributes to the success of the media in convincing Americans of the "rightness" of moral relativism. The irony of this is, of course, bitterly amusing. See Richard John Neuhaus, "Tongue-Tied in Public," *First Things* 70 (February 1997), 58–59.

- *Ethical analysis*: exploring the elements of morally complex situations. For example, the Bible is against lying, but was it right to lie to the Gestapo in order to preserve the lives of Jews hiding within the home?
- *Moral decision-making*: having the courage to act on the results of the analytical task just completed.
- *Acting as responsible agents*: making such moral decisions on a consistent basis; the practice of moral action helps to seal such principles in our hearts.
- *Virtue development*: developing godly character, not simply right behaviors. For this reason spiritual development and moral development walk with joined hands. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit.
- *Moral identity*: becoming a unified person, what James 1:4 calls mature and complete.

Holmes argues that life affords us with myriad ethical decisions, and we often base these decisions on a set of rules that we find near at hand. These rules are based, in turn, on principles, which ultimately have some foundational base. Jesus operated in this fashion. When confronted with the problem of divorce, he went behind the Mosaic Law to the foundational basis of Judaism, the doctrine of creation, and derived from this a principle that men and women are to learn to love and forgive one another. Wolfhart Pannenberg has recently argued in precisely this fashion relative to contemporary ethical problems facing the church.[39] Such a process points us to dependence on God instead of on our possessions or ourselves.

Jesus made decisions on the basis of principles rooted in Scripture and a sensitivity to the will of God. James would have us lead lives of similar fidelity—lives that integrate actions, mind, and heart. This is the life of Christian character. Otherwise, we too easily know the good but fail to do it. Now that you know not to judge, and now that you know to trust only in God—do it!

39. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Revelation and the Homosexual Experience," *Christianity Today* (Nov. 11, 1996), 35, 37.

James 5:1–6

NOW LISTEN, YOU rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. [2]Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. [3]Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. [4]Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. [5]You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. [6]You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

Original Meaning

JAMES SHIFTS HIS attention from the merchant class, which has just received the benefit of his honest negative assessment, to the landowning class, which will receive the same. The two sections are linked by the common thread of the desire for wealth. James assumes the mantle not of teacher or preacher but of prophet, for his warnings are the warnings of coming destruction and wrath.

Martin holds that the parallel to the Old Testament prophets indicates that the rich landowners must be unbelievers.[1] This is indicative of one of the most common fallacies of New Testament scholarship.[2] James could reasonably

1. Ralph P. Martin, *James*, 172; Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 195; and Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 174, also see the rich landowners as outside the Christian church.

2. G. B. Caird, "The Development of the Doctrine of Christ in the New Testament," *Christ For Us Today*, ed. N. Pittenger (London: SCM, 1968), 69–70, pointed out that as helpful as the original meaning of a term may be, the only issue of prime importance is to understand what the author intended by that term.

> Parallels to the New Testament in other literatures and religions are in themselves no evidence of dependence; and, even where dependence can be proved, the fact remains that to trace a word, an idea, or a practice to its origin helps us very little to explain what it means in its new setting. A probe into the pre-Mosaic origins of the Jewish Passover tells us nothing about the Christian Eucharist. Bultmann has told us the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel had a previous existence as a Gnostic hymn, and for all I know he may be right. But even if this could be proved beyond reasonable