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Faith and the Work of Justice

James W. McCarty III

The biblical book of James is a problem. James is a problem for those of us who live in an era of global neoliberal capitalism in which always-expanding growth and consumption is the first social virtue. It is a problem for post-enlightenment people and societies that believe that faith is wholly about private beliefs rather than public practices. It is a problem for American Christians who accept both of these social stances as “natural” and therefore live as though Christian discipleship is compatible with the gluttony of consumerism as long as one “believes” the right doctrines or practices the right rituals. And James is a problem for every suburban church that honors persons celebrated by the world for their ability to make money by placing them in positions of ecclesial leadership, as if business acumen corresponds to spiritual maturity, while rarely or never providing the poor with opportunities to lead. James, like Jesus, does not sugarcoat the radical social implications of the kingdom of God inaugurated in the life and ministry of Jesus, in which the last become the first and the oppressed have seats of honor at God’s table. And these social implications are a problem for Christians and non-Christians alike who are comfortable with a status quo of social divisions and oppressions based on material inequalities.¹

James is a problem not only to us who live in the twenty-first century. James has been a problem for centuries. It was one of the last additions to the recognized New Testament canon, and is in my experience one of the least preached-from books in Churches of Christ. I have never heard a sermon in a Church of Christ preached on James 5.1–6, for example. James was a problem for American slaveholders when its words were in the hands and on the lips of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who found in it divine authorization for his work to abolish slavery in the United States.² Most famously, however, James was a problem for the great reformer Martin Luther who called James an “epistle of straw” because of its lack of sustained theological reflection in the manner of Paul’s letters.³ No other book in the New Testament reads like James; the tone and organization and even some of the language is unique to this letter.⁴ James is a problem.

1. My focus on James’s teaching on wealth and poverty and interpretation of key passages is indebted to two important texts: Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987); and Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

2. On Frederick Douglass’s use of James in his abolitionist speeches and sermons see Margaret P. Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass, Darkness and the Epistle of James* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

3. On the history of the reception of James, see David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1–100.

4. On the relative dearth of explicitly Christian language and the difficulty of naming the structure of James, see Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 473–474. On the uniqueness of James’s language, including at least forty-eight words not used elsewhere in the New Testament, see John Painter, “James as the First Catholic Epistle,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 60.3 (2006): 254–255.

But James is not a problem because the author disagrees with or contradicts Paul. In fact, James and Paul have much in common when it comes to the social implications of God's kingdom and the life of the church. Rather, James is a problem because he writes things like this:

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away. (1.9–11)

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? (2.5–7)

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. (5.1–6)

In addition to these blatant condemnations of the rich (sometimes merely for being wealthy and other times for the ways they used their wealth or its social benefits), there are other places where James commends humility over pride (4.6–7); feeding the hungry over merely wishing them well (2.14–17); warns against making future plans to do business and make money (4.12); condemns giving the rich seats of honor and the poor seats of dishonor (2.1–7); condemns showing favoritism based on wealth (2.2–4); and says the poor are those God has blessed with the richest faith (2.5). In each of these statements James criticizes the rich for their wealth and their way of life.

In short, James identifies wealth and the rich as a theological, ethical, and pastoral problem. Wealth is a problem for James because it endangers the souls of the rich by tempting them to believe they sustain their own lives rather than God (1.9–11; 4.13–16). It is a problem because it invites the logic of the world to creep into the life of the church and creates divisions and partiality based on wealth (2.1–7). These divisions regularly work to oppress the impoverished and violate their dignity. Wealth is also a theological, ethical, and pastoral problem because James declares that the wealth in the community of Christians he is writing to was attained through unjust and oppressive business practices (5.1–6). Wealth, for James, is something to avoid and repent from—it is sin.

In making these statements James is not a lone voice in the New Testament. Jesus, especially as his words are recorded in Luke, preached the same message. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort,” declared Jesus (Luke 6.20, 24). “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” Jesus said to a rich young ruler (Matthew 19.23–24). On multiple occasions Jesus told the rich, either the rich young ruler or Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1–10), that they must give up their wealth and make right what they have done wrong to the poor before they can become his disciple. Jesus, in the only parable with a named character, tells us the story of Lazarus the beggar who upon death went to be with Abraham while the rich man at whose gate Lazarus spent his life begging went to Hades (Luke 16.19–31). Jesus taught that the scribes who wore fancy clothes and used their status to gain social respect while “devouring widows’ homes” would receive a great condemnation (Mark 12.38–40), and claimed that the poor who give out of their

poverty are viewed more favorably by God than those who give out of their wealth (Mark 12.41–44). Indeed, it was Jesus’s overturning of the tables in the temple and proclamation that changing money in the temple was a form of robbery of the poor that moves us into the events that culminate in Jesus’s crucifixion. Jesus was such a problem because of his teachings regarding the rich and the impoverished that the powers that be killed him. James was a problem because of teachings like this and Christians, more often than not, ignore him. And in doing so, we often kill the radical message of the gospel about how to live in our world.

James and Paul on Faith and Works

It is because James focuses so much of his attention on moral matters, including a heavy emphasis on controlling one’s tongue and maintaining one’s spiritual purity alongside his critique of the wealthy, that many people have assumed James is explicitly arguing with Paul or contradicting Paul’s message of salvation by faith rather than by works. This is not the case, however. Paul and James addressed different audiences with their own contextual issues. In addition, James and Paul agreed on the relation of faith and good works. They both believe that the two are interrelated and flow from each other. Paul does not believe that works of the law are necessarily interrelated with faith, but that is not a concern or topic that James addresses. Whereas Paul wrote to communities in which people argued for the necessity of certain works of the law like circumcision or celebrating certain holidays, James wrote to people who lived as though their faith did not demand radical changes in their social relationships. Neither James nor Paul, however, ever deny the saving power of Jesus’s life or the call for those who call Jesus *Lord* to live according to his teaching and example. In short, both James and Paul believe that we are saved by the faith of Christ and that this salvation is manifest in a life of good works that imitate the character of God and embody God’s kingdom.⁵ This is especially clear in their writings addressing the issue of the treatment of the poor in Christian worship.

First Corinthians 11.23–34 is a passage that is read as much as any passage in Churches of Christ and it is usually interpreted to mean that we should silently reflect on the body of Jesus on the cross and partake of the Lord’s Supper in a solemn manner. However, this is not what Paul meant when he wrote the passage. A proper understanding of Paul’s meaning here compared to James’s teaching in James 2 will demonstrate that Paul and James did not disagree about the role of wealth and poverty in the social life of the church.

First Corinthians 11.17–22 sets the stage for what comes in the following verses, but it is rarely read in conjunction with them in Churches of Christ. In these verses Paul chastises the Corinthian church because there were “divisions” and “factions” among them when they ate the Lord’s Supper. In the earliest Christian churches the Lord’s Supper was often an actual meal, and in Corinth it seems that it was something like an ancient potluck. Each person brought food to be shared at the table. However, each of the members of the Corinthian church “went ahead with their own supper.” In other words, they ate the food they brought but did not share it with the rest of the congregation. The result was that some people left the table of the Lord with bellies full of food and wine, even to the point of drunkenness, while others left hungry. Paul is so angry about this practice he exclaims, “What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!”

It is after giving us this context that Paul instructs the Christians in Corinth that whoever “eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11.27), and that they should “examine themselves” because “all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor 11.28–29). Because Paul recounts the events from the night Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper as a practice right before this admonition, and because of the tendency to spiritualize hard moral teachings in the Bible (as is often done to Jesus’s teaching to “turn the other cheek”),⁶ many Christians today read this teaching to be one of reflecting on Jesus’s tortured body on the

5. On these similarities see Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God*, 10–17.

6. For two ways to read the Sermon on the Mount without spiritualizing Jesus’s “hard teachings,” see Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) and Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, “The Transforming Initiatives in the Sermon on the Mount” in *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 125–145.

cross. However, in the next chapter (12.12–27) Paul provides an elaborate description of the church as “the body.” In light of Paul’s earlier admonition regarding church practices of discriminating and creating factions based on wealth, and his following instruction that the church is the body, it is best to understand Paul’s teaching to “discern the body” before partaking in the Lord’s Supper to mean that churches should examine their demographics and the way those demographics bestow honor, privilege, humiliation, and/or oppression upon members before they partake in the Lord’s Supper. To practice this ritual in an unjust community, says Paul, is to invite judgment rather than to participate in the kingdom of God.

James addresses a similar issue in chapter 2 of his letter. There appear to be wealthy and poor Christians in the communities to which James writes. And it appears to be a regular practice in those communities to provide the best seats to the wealthiest members “with gold rings and fine clothes” (Jas 2.2) and the worst seats to the poorest members. In making the “distinctions among themselves,” James writes, they have become “judges with evil thoughts.” These distinctions, in a way not dissimilar to the factions that angered Paul, went contrary to the ways of God’s kingdom in which “God [has] chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be the heirs of the kingdom” (Jas 2.5). In this practice, James says that the churches in which the rich are honored in this way commit blasphemy in doing so (Jas 2.6–7).

For Paul the unjust factions based on wealth disparities in Corinth made those Christians “answerable for the body and the blood of the Lord” and worthy of God’s judgment (1 Cor 11.27–29). For James distinctions in honor based on wealth make Christians blasphemers. For both Paul and James, then, wealth and/or the unjust treatment of the poor are so incompatible with the ways of the kingdom of God that they threaten to cancel any verbal or ritualistic expression of faith. Without good works of justice there can be no faith. A Christian ecclesiology is an ecclesiology of justice. The kingdom of God includes churches in which there are no distinctions between the rich and the poor. On this James and Paul agree: faith without ecclesial justice is not true faith at all. However, James goes further in his critique than Paul does inasmuch as James also critiques the rich for their practices outside of Christian worship.

In chapter 2 James calls the rich oppressors for their exploitation of the poor in court. In James 5 he tells them to “weep and wail” because their riches will rot and rust, and that that “rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire” (James 5.1–3). Why is this so? Because they did not pay just wages to those who mowed their fields and instead the rich have lived in luxury. James moves beyond the unequal treatment of the rich and poor in Christian worship to critique the means by which they became wealthy and how they spend that wealth. James is concerned with social justice as much as ecclesial justice. And in this vision it is the poor who are “heirs of the kingdom” while the wealthy will watch their wealth rot in the “fire.” This is apocalyptic language and its message is clear: according to James, God’s kingdom is a kingdom of social justice as well as ecclesial justice.

The Message of James for Today

In light of James’s unrelenting critique of the wealthy as well as the social and ecclesial benefits they receive because of their wealth, a message that Paul also preaches, how are we to apply the message of James to our lives in twenty-first century American churches? First, we must move away from showing more honor to our wealthy members than our poor ones. How are we currently doing this? One way, and I speak anecdotally here, is by appointing wealthier members to positions of leadership at a higher rate than poorer members because we either desire our church leaders to have the skills needed to amass wealth or because we equate material success with spiritual maturity. In my experiences at churches across the United States, it is often the wealthiest who are elected to be elders and, therefore, to be the most influential leaders in our churches. However, James forces us to question both this practice and the assumptions underlying this practice for three reasons.

First, it is contrary to the nature of God’s kingdom in which the least in the eyes of the world are the greatest. When churches appoint the members of their congregations who are the most successful in the eyes of the world as their primary leaders they reinforce the ways the world judges people rather than the way that God judges people. It is an adaptation of the ways of the kingdoms of this world rather than the kingdom of God. Second, it leads to divine judgment and practical blasphemy when churches reinforce divisions and

factions created by earthly life. Third, it leaves unquestioned, or even honors, the role of wealth in the Christian life (which according to Jesus and James is dubious at best) and does not ask questions about how that wealth was amassed. As was the case in the time of Jesus, James, and Paul, the means of becoming wealthy in today's world too often corresponds with great oppression and the impoverishment of others, including other Christians. We must move beyond creating divisions of honor in our churches based on material wealth and success, or risk putting our faith into question.

A second way that we can apply the message of James to Christian life today is by recognizing the Christian call to work for social justice. It is clear that James and Paul are concerned with ecclesial justice. Churches should be just communities and, when they are not, they are not participating in God's kingdom. However, James reminds us that Christian morality applies to social and business practices as much as church practices. Just as it is kingdom work to dissolve all social distinctions over the Lord's table, it is kingdom work to decrease the oppression of the poor in court and to provide just wages for people who mow lawns and tend fields. James reminds us that faith is faith only when it is accompanied by justice in our churches and in our social and political lives. And this is why James is a problem—he reminds us that what Jesus taught about the life of discipleship is as important for our salvation as what Paul taught about the implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus for us and the universe. Of course, Paul would not disagree with this point. And neither should we.

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