

Lessons for the Powerful Rich and Vulnerable Poor (The Book of James)

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Abstract: This article explores the tension between the powerful rich and the vulnerable poor in the book of James. Attention is given to some practical lessons for these persons in the Christian community, then and now. James advocates a faith that works, empowered and guided by the royal love commandment that intertwines love for God and love for the neighbor. The article challenges a type of practical atheism that amounts to a “do-thing” policy and practice towards the needs of the vulnerable poor.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice drives the argument of the Book of James. James is perhaps the most consistently ethical social writing in the New Testament that compares well with the OT Book of Amos. The author says that faith alone, without works, is dead. Social justice is something that the people of God (both poor and rich) are to “do.”

The idyllic picture of the Early Church, wherein Christian believers “had all things in common” (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35) is subsequently fractured by Ananias and Sapphira’s dishonesty (Acts 5:1-11) and the complaint about partiality against the Grecian widows (6:1). A rupture between the “haves” and the “have-nots” continues to raise its ugly head in various NT letters. James is one such letter that voices issues surrounding the hiatus between the powerful rich and the vulnerable poor¹ and their corresponding treatment. Joe is one such person of the vulnerable poor:

Joe was a thirty-year old crack addict, with a long history of entering treatment, dropping out, or relapsing within weeks after completing programs. His attendance at AA or NA meetings was spotty at best. The social worker that worked with me helped Joe get a job as a stock person in a neighborhood grocery. He completed an outpatient program and remained clean for many months.

Joe had two children who lived with their maternal grandparents, since their mother, also an addict, was of no help. In his recovery, the

¹ We need to bear in mind that the vast percentage of people in the Mediterranean region lived close to the line of abject poverty, something akin to a hand-to-mouth existence.

grandparents agreed to share and eventually relinquish custody of their grandchildren to Joe. The court specified that he needed a solid residence for them. The social worker helped him to get SSI assistance. Along with his salary, Joe obtained approval for a publically subsidized apartment. As part of the final approval for his apartment, a physical exam was required. I did his physical and the required lab-testing, which was then analyzed by the lab. He passed in all areas except that he tested positive for HIV. He was devastated. Then, it was believed that HIV positive people would develop AIDS and die within 2-4 years. He was denied approval for his apartment and in a few days committed suicide. A week later, the public hospital, which analyzed the lab-test for free, wrote me a letter and informed me that a lab-mistake resulted in a false positive for Joe and that he was not indeed HIV positive.²

Joe represents many marginalized persons, who make bad choices, fall into disastrous cycles of poverty, and who make fresh starts but are then distressed by people and institutions to the extent that they give up trying or give up on life itself.

Armed with his social-justice agenda, James uses a homiletic style and addresses the community as "brethren" or "beloved brethren" (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19; "sister" in the 3rd person in 2:15). James' greeting addresses his readership as "twelve tribes of the *Diaspora*" (1:1), and the material of the book is replete with OT examples, laws, and wisdom traditions. The setting appears to be Jewish-Christian and is noted as a "synagogue" or "assembly" (2:2) when the community is actually gathered. However, because James uses some universal traditions, he looks beyond the assembly to the larger world. The deprived audience, *you* is coerced by the *rich* (in 3rd person), "suppose that a *wealthy person* comes into *your* assembly" (2:2) or "Is it not *the rich* who are exploiting *you*? Are *they* not the ones who are dragging *you* into court . . . and slander *you*?" (2:6-7). The questions assume a positive response: Of course, the rich are the ones who dishonor the good name of Christians—certainly not the poor. James highlights the poor's absurd and selective partiality toward their oppressors, who display wealth and exert power.

At the same time, chapter 5 reveals a direct address to the rich when James highlights the transitory character of riches, "*you* have hoarded wealth in the last days" (5:3). The community has "caved in" to worldly attitudes of partiality that accompany the welcome of the rich to the extent that the rich are directly addressed (5:1ff.). From the polemical nature of James's instruction (*paraenesis*), we can only surmise that there were real situations in the Early Church (outside of

² This story and other stories in this article are taken from an interview with Dr. Wayne Lewis, who worked extensively with the poor in DC, who now resides in Norfolk, VA where he pastors a Nazarene Church. The interview during this last summer covered at least ten years of medical service in the DC area (1990-2000).

James' community) that reflected serious problems. By their adoption of the world's standards, the unity of the community is compromised.

James indicts the rich for their lives of luxury at the expense of the poor. He allies himself with the poor and offers hope to the hopeless. James relates social justice to effective prayer and makes an appeal to unity, integrity, and consistency—for the Christian and the Christian community.

The need for social justice reflects itself in the high proportion of people living in poverty in the U.S. and the broader global community that is rich and prosperous. Although the poor in America live better than the global poor, manifestations of abject poverty call Christian commitment into question of the need to help the poor in our midst (local and global). The existence of widespread abject poverty in the world's poorest nations must also be met with practical help to relieve suffering and to empower the poor to help themselves.³

Faith and Works

What about the relationship between "faith" and "works?" James says that faith is not evidenced by one's belief in God or mere intellectual orthodoxy. The contrast is not between "faith" and "works" but a living faith and practical atheism. Theoretical "faith" does not distinguish human beings from the belief of shuddering demons (2:19). Faith alone without works is useless—it is dead faith:

Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together (2:20-22 NIV)

Abraham believed God, but his faith was proved by his actions (Gen. 22:1-14). A person is justified through practical Christianity, expressed in helpful behavior towards others, such as Rahab the prostitute who demonstrated faith by welcoming Israel's spies with "sacred hospitality" (Joshua 2:1-21). James asks the rhetorical question, "Was not Rahab the prostitute justified by works?" (2:25).

Abraham and Rahab provide examples of the way in which one behaves—actively and practically. James denigrates a cold religious confession that can say the right things, but be devoid of relationship with God or needy people. He exposes a false Christianity of appearances only. A do-nothing policy means that one has sided with the devil. Indictment of quietism is clearly expressed in James 4:17: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it—sins." "The Christianity that James preaches is not a comfortable religion. But his practical, virile teaching will remain salutary and necessary as long as

³ The writer has discussed at length some of the socio-economic issues in the global community with his colleague, Dr. Douglas Walker, Professor of Economics, in the Robertson School of Government of Regent University (Virginia Beach, VA). Discussions occurred during the Spring, '08.

Christians continue to miss the path from knowledge to action, from faith to charity, from piety to moral proof."⁴

The author had the privilege of working with Sean and Linda, two elderly people of minimal means, who experienced a radical transformation of life, leading to their grateful response. Initially, they targeted various blocks in Norfolk, Virginia, where they lived, by passing out free loaves of bread to countless households. Their influence widened as they worked in partnership with local food banks and numerous grocery stores. With their limited funds, they purchased several vans and daily collected and distributed food to numerous low-income facilities. In addition, they opened the church's fellowship center three times a week for food-distribution (not cash) after a short service for people who were homeless, poor, and addicted. While the poor had every opportunity for a decision to begin the Christian life, their Christian experience never became the basis for their privilege of receiving food. Over twenty years, thousands of people made life-changing decisions through gifts of bountiful compassion. Their reward consisted in helping others in the vicious cycles of poverty.⁵

The Question of the "Brother or "Neighbor"

James summons the rich and poor to an active love for the "brother," "sister," or "neighbor"; they are to be the recipients of charitable assistance (2:8). James repeats the OT directive in Lev. 19:17-18, "love your neighbor as yourself,"⁶ taken up by Jesus in dialogue with a rich young man (Matt. 19:16-22) or a lawyer (Lk. 10:25-37). The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Lk. 10:30-36 is framed to undermine the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor" (10:29). The lawyer wants Jesus to define *neighbor*. According to the Halakah, the term, *neighbor* (*rēa, plēšion*), applied to every Jewish fellow-countryman but did not extend to a non-Israelite.⁷ The question implies two standards of treatment: love for Jewish neighbors\brothers and absence of love for non-Israelite persons. Jesus refuses to give the lawyer a comprehensive list or a means of correctly identifying a neighbor. In his counter-question, Jesus stands the lawyer's question on its head, "Who *proved* to be the neighbor" (10:36). The lawyer's undefined *object* of love is inverted to become the active *subject* of compassion.

⁴ Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, (Waco: Word Publishing Co., 1988), 358.

⁵ Observations were made during 1998-2000 in Norfolk when I helped Sean and Linda with food collection and distribution to the poor.

⁶ In several places, James uses Leviticus to substantiate his exhortations, most pointedly with the law of love, enunciated in Torah, but ratified by Jesus' behavior and teaching.

⁷"Samaritans, foreigners, and resident aliens who do not join the community of Israel within 12 months are excluded." J. Fichtner, "*plēšion*" *TDNT*, VI, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 315.

In the 21st Century, the lawyer's question about the neighbor's identity is the same question raised by Christians: "Who is my brother?" The question is unanswerable in that love does not begin by defining groups, but discovers them in actual need.⁸ There is no religious "stained-glass" expression from the hated half-breed Samaritan; he does not look God-ward or evidence that his life-giving behavior is "religious." He sees a desperate crisis, is moved with compassion, and then proceeds to provide continued life-giving support. James' ethical teachings broaden out to include a dependence upon the Jesus-traditions, expressed elsewhere in the letter. In the 21st Century, the truth of Evangelical Christianity is to be expressed in efforts to relieve the suffering poor and to provide an example to those who are not believers.

James argues for the comprehensive aspect of the Law, including the Decalogue in Exod. 20:1-17, the love commandment, and the "weightier things of the Law" affirmed by Jesus (Matt. 21:21). His readers must not "pick and choose" which law they obey or neglect. The dual love-commandment highlights the absurdity of believing and obeying the Decalogue and yet refusing to honor or love the "neighbor" (James 2:8-13). In context, the mention of the "neighbor" means the disadvantaged poor, not to be exclusively understood. Thus, we would submit that James reviews Jesus' teachings and approach, which are inclusive in nature—not exclusive. In the 21st Century, Jesus and James orient the Christian community to be responsive to those in need (within and without the Church).

In 2:22-25, James uses the metaphor of a person who looks at a mirror to portray an active faith—certainly not passive. The person who is a hearer of the word alone is likened to the one who has short-term memory loss because of not intently looking into the Law.

The Powerful Rich

James indicts the powerful rich for their selfish exploitation of the poor. The terms *rich one* (*plousios*) and *poor one* (*ptōchos*) speak to the issue of wealth or its absence. Mention of the rich in 1:9-10 prepares for later directives to the rich (2:2-4, 5-12, 15-16; 4:13-17; 5:1-6).

Those who are wealthy are in great danger of self-trust (bragging 1:9). For the rich, pompous bragging will give way to humiliation since the rich have "had their day" at the expense of the poor. Their transitory character will "pass away like a wild flower" (1:10). He tells the rich to "wail" (*klauō*) and "cry out in pain" (*ololuzō*) because their riches have rotted, clothing is moth-eaten, and gold and silver are tarnished (5:2-3). He accuses rich members of amassing such flawed items instead of helping the poor. Their conduct is clearly irreligious, inhumane, and anti-social. Apparently, some of these powerful rich persons became part of James' "assembly."

The writer caricatures those who profess faith (intellectual or creedal) but choose not to help the poor:

⁸ See also Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46).

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (1:16)

In the 21st Century context, those who are responsible for job-applications, often reflect similar attitudes to those in James' community, which amount to practical atheism. When people vocalize the unconscionable words like *go in peace, be warmed, be filled, "go get a job"* to those who are distraught, scantily clothed, hungry, and jobless—when it is clearly within their power to meet their physical needs—their words do nothing mock the impoverished and reinforce the community's social stratification?

It is very difficult for people to reflect upon and accept the Christian message when their primary concern is physical survival; both James and Jesus express the "gospel" in a holistic manner. In our culture, such needs are well reflected in issues related to the needs of the poor for housing, food, clothing, and a job—which are so often denied.

Nineteen-year old Sheila worked in a fast-food restaurant and was laid off. She obtained a bed in a shelter for women and as part of her intake, a physical exam was required. When I performed the physical she was fine. During our conversation she was a fount of optimism. She was going to get work and move out of the shelter in just a few weeks. Her job-loss was simply a "bump" in her plans for the future. In the fall, I saw her again for a cold and sore throat. She was much duller and far less optimistic. She had been in the shelter for three months and still was jobless. People were interested but when she gave them a shelter address or phone number they gave her the line, "Don't call us. We'll call you." Rapidly, she deteriorated into the "black hole" of depression and was brutally victimized through physical and sexual abuse, and thereby incurring several STDs.⁹

What would have occurred for Sheila, along with countless thousands, if she had received a job-offer, which offered hope and a means of independent living?

The rich often prosper by virtue of their oppression of the poor day-laborers. James argues that wages are not patronizing help to the poor but their actual due. Their day-laborers have mowed and harvested the landowners' fields but wages are denied to those who are dependent on them for physical survival. Their prayers will be unanswered for they ask with the wrong purpose—to spend freely for their own pleasures (4:2-4), which is linked to enmity with God (4:5).

In the 21st Century, violent and greedy aggressors can be identified with those involved in subprime mortgages and foreclosures, wherein powerful rich lenders victimize people through corrupt loans, balloon-payments, rising interest rates, and qualifying people, whom they know cannot repay them. If they are

⁹ Dr. Wayne Lewis, 2008.

inside or outside the Christian community, James states that God will not answer prayer, since violent aggressors are God's enemies, including the powerful, who display riches, exact dishonest payments, and foreclose on poor homeowners with a callous disregard for the vulnerable weak. Greed and aggression are portrayed through numerous faces in the global economic world.

Ungodly partiality (lit. *to lift the face*) by the poor, is often shown to the rich, who are bedecked with gold rings and fine clothing. They are shown preferential treatment in the assembly's seating arrangement. By one look at a visitor, the poor guide the rich to the more prestigious and comfortable seats, while the shabbily clothed are left standing or are told, "Sit on the floor by my feet" (2:2-3). God chooses to be partial to the poor for they are chosen, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom. Preferential treatment of the rich insults the poor (2:6) and reveals "double-mindedness" and "doubting" (1:6-8). "It should be unthinkable to **hold the faith** and exercise **discrimination between people**."¹⁰ If people really keep the royal love-commandment, they are doing right. But if they show favoritism, they sin and are lawbreakers to the extent that they had committed murder (2:8-11).

There is a distinction between those who are poor through no fault of their own and those who have direct responsibility for their bleak existence. The Church is not called to "enable" irresponsible or addictive lifestyles; James speaks of "fine conduct" and "deeds done in humility," which are to be expressed by the poor (3:13). The people of God are to thoughtfully discern different needs with the goal of helping people become independent and responsible persons of church and society. Discernment needs to be coupled with indiscriminate compassion. The Church cannot condemn either the responsible or irresponsible poor, but encourage both groups to be responsible and more productive. Perhaps "empowerment" might be the goal rather than enablement.

Over the past half-century, marked progress has been made in reducing U.S. poverty in that the poverty-rate has been halved from 20% to 10%.¹¹ Doug Walker suggests that while government can provide some minimal support; the Church or charities can provide further assistance by tailoring assistance to individual and familial circumstances, using discernment and discretion, coupled with in initial and long-term accountability and needed encouragement. He suggests two imperatives: 1) We cannot let people and their vulnerable children starve, 2) We cannot create situations (locally, nationally, and internationally) which foster unhealthy dependence. For example, the Church can assist individuals who have lost jobs, but tailor assistance based upon the efforts of individual to find jobs with a time-table of lessening assistance. Also, the Church needs to be courageous in speaking out to the rich and wealthy about the needs of

¹⁰ Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 93.

¹¹ Table 4 of the Historical Poverty Tables of the U.S. Census Bureau. While 9.3% of Caucasian families with children live in dire poverty, 21% of African-American families live in dire poverty. This figure does not take into account the 1.4 billion people in the global community who live in abject poverty

others and the temptation of hoarding of riches.¹² This is precisely James' line of approach with the rich.

Christians, churches, and charities are better equipped than government to empower the poor because they can apply discernment, discretion, and accountability to needy persons. On the other hand, government is practically mandated through formulas to treat everyone the same, irrespective of their practical need or level of responsibility, and cannot deal with moral questions. James inveighs against a discrimination expressed through partiality. The following narrative expresses a charity's genuine care as well as a hidden partiality.

Rose started Columbia Road Health Services (CRHS), a free clinic for the homeless, unemployed, and working poor in Washington, DC, and later the Washington ministry for Health Care for the Homeless (HCH). After years of working with the homeless, the entire staff felt the need for a place where homeless men could recover. As Rose walked to the CRHS, she passed an abandoned home that had become a crack-house and haven for the addicted. Every day for three years, she and her fellow-nuns stopped in front of the house to pray, convinced that the respite care center would replace a crack-house.

A few thousand dollars came in and was earmarked for the purchase and restoration of the house. One day Rose's pastor, Gordon Cosby, called concerning a lady wanting to donate in person. Rose asked Gordon to thank the lady, accept the donation, and inform her that she was too busy to come. Gordon insisted and Rose came to his office to meet her. They chatted for a bit and Rose wondered how long this discussion would continue. Then the woman said she wanted to offer a donation and hoped it would help fund the project. The two-million dollar check was enough for the purchase-price, extensive renovation, and operating expenses for six months.

It became Christ House, a respite care center for homeless men, offering a warm, clean, and safe place while they recover from serious illness and prepare for employment.¹³

Commitment, compassion, and prayer by Rose and the nuns were effective. However, we note a "silent" partiality concerning the woman's begrudging welcome; surely the reception would have been markedly different if Rose knew of the "dollar amount" of the gift.

The only remedy is the "wisdom that comes from heaven," which is full of mercy and impartial (3:17). Love means a genuine welcome of the poor, holistic concern for them, and compassion for the many faces of the "needy poor."

¹² Dr. Doug Walker, 2008.

¹³ Lewis, '08.

Showing mercy is required for receiving mercy and being blessed (2:12; cf. Matt. 5:7). Mercy will always win the case in God's tribunal (2:13).

The Vulnerable Poor

James also provides encouragement to the poor. In 2:3, the poor person (*ho ptōchos*), identified by filthy clothing, is akin to a beggar. In 1:9 we find the term "the humble one" (*ho tapeinos*), who is also called a "brother" or "sister" (2:15). James also brings "widows" and "orphans" into view as stereotypes of those who are most vulnerable to oppression. Looking after orphans and widows is part of what constitutes true religion (1:27). "To visit orphans and widows . . . may be literally to go and spend time with them; but certainly is also to do so in order to make provision for their needs."¹⁴ These poor (*anawim*) can only wait for their vindication by God; they are deprived by no fault of their own and are "drastic examples"¹⁵ of victims of greed, aggression, and illegal practices, exacerbated by aggressors who are legally well-represented. The destitute have no legal recourse for social justice since they have no funds for hiring lawyers or bribing judges—*baksheesh* (2:6-7), a corrupt practice in countless countries, experienced by the author and his missionary parents in Beirut, Lebanon regarding customs officials and the release of a Willis Jeep. James takes his stand with the poor, weak, and vulnerable—those who have been cheated out of their just wages. The only cry that God will hear is the cry of the oppressed day-laborers (James 5:4); He will act in retribution.

James does not advocate poverty for its own sake, nor does he celebrate poverty due to people's irresponsibility; however assures the responsible poor that they are special signs of God's choice or bias. He clarifies that God has chosen them with a special status of divine favor (2:5-6). His choice of the poor is counter-cultural with respect to the world's assessment of poverty as a curse. While they are poor with respect to the world's standards (2-5-6), they are also "rich with respect to faith" (2:5-6). He points to the glorious crown that affirms victory (1:12—*stephanos—the victor's crown/wreath*), which is a reward for those who love God. James encourages the poor to change their perspective from sadness to paradoxical joy, grounded in their exaltation (1:9); a profound reversal lies ahead from the current stratified situation (1:9).¹⁶ James does not say that God loves the vulnerable more than the powerful. However, James says that God takes the side of the oppressed poor. It is not a question of equal treatment for all, which would be a reiteration of social stratification between the "haves" and the "have-nots," reflected in a growing hiatus between the rich and poor in the 21st Century.

¹⁴ Laws, 89.

¹⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *James: Word Biblical Commentary*, (Waco: Word Publishing Co., 1988), lxxv-lxxvi.

¹⁶ Prov. 1:9; 4:9; 12:4; I Thess. 2:19; I Cor. 9:25; II Tim. 4:8; Rev. 2:9.

Whereas the rich are called to compassion, the suffering poor are encouraged to reflect endurance and patience during their "testing" (*peirasmos*) as an occasion for joy (1:2). The grounds for such paradoxical joy will lead to proving the worth (*dokimos*) of their faith. The adjective, *dokimos* (worthy or approved), derives from the field of metallurgy wherein precious metals are put to the refiner's fire through smelting. The smelted metal is stamped *dokimos*, meaning "proven," "refined" or "worthy." The result of such communal testing leads to the quality of "endurance" (*hupomonē*—staying power), initially noted in 1:3-4.

The second exhortation to endure follows the portion relating to the financial contrast between the rich and the poor (1:9-11) and the pending great reversal. James uses two calls to endurance (*inclusio* in 1:2-4; 1:12) on either side of the theme of the great reversal (1:9-11). The rich cannot view the poor's divine approval as an excuse for thoughtless words, judgment over others, and unconscionable behavior.

James encourages the poor that they are not governed by an inexorable fate. He reassures them that their trials, which include poverty, are not signs of divine disfavor or rejection. This is no call to inactivity but to a responsible and fiscal approach to one's resources, noted in his metaphor of the farmer who works his field, who "waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains" (5:7-8). The *Parousia* ("return and presence"), or its idea, is expressed in three ways: "be patient until *the Lord's Coming*" (5:7), "*the Lord's coming is near*" (5:8), "*the Judge is standing at the door*" (5:9). Patience counters the bitter complaint of the poor against the rich. The patient person finds security in relationship to God—without judgment (5:9) and a shared experience with "good company," the OT prophets (5:10). The second example is that of Job, "You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:11). Job's commitment to God in the midst of tragic adversity is emphasized so that the readers may draw encouragement—it is possible to withstand such adversity.

To the oppressed, James states that they must back up their verbal profession by their "fine conduct" through their meekness or gentleness (*praütās*) in 3:13. Again, James' plea for *fine conduct* includes responsible behavior from the poor. Envy has no place whatsoever in the Christian community, "these things should not be" (3:10). Such false wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic in origin (3:15). *Fine conduct* includes: endurance, the promise of the crown of eternal life, answered prayer, responsibility, a profound reversal of conditions, divine approval, expectant faith, and serenity in peace-making.

Unity, Integrity, and Consistency

James appeals to unity, integrity, and consistency for the individual and the Christian community. His appeal for faith-filled prayer promises a response from a generous and gracious God (1:15), who gives without regard to personal status and without equivocation. Such petition needs to be expressed through faith without doubting. Where there is unbelief, a person is double-minded and

unstable; he resembles the wind-tossed surf (1:7-8). Unbelief is often expressed through unfeeling words towards the marginalized.

A former U.S. President stood up and flipped through the *Washington Post Classifieds* and stated, "Golly Geez. I dunno why there are so many homeless people. Look at all of these jobs in the paper. I guess with all these jobs available those homeless people just don't want to work and would rather be on the street with no responsibilities." Of course, the President failed to actually take the time to understand that the jobs were for engineers, lawyers, and other white collar positions.¹⁷

James traces disunity to people who are torn apart by conflicting desires. The wealthy are fueled by the ungodly motive of greed that ignites wars, fighting, and strife (4:1-2). James says that "desire does not attain its end but sends the greedy back with empty hands." Greed reflects the world's basic corruption (4:1, 4) in that friendship with the world is compared to an adulterous existence (4:4). James' frequent pejorative, "double-mindedness" (1:8; 4:8) characterizes the unbeliever since "double-mindedness" is equated with sin. The one who separates hearing from doing is a deceiver (1:22-24) with an empty faith (2:14-17). On the poor's side, their faith should be met by a responsible work-ethic as well. Their faith without fine conduct or a responsible work-ethic is also double-minded and empty.

Disunity and double-dealing are also obvious in the socio-economic separation between the rich and powerful and the poor and vulnerable. Disunity rears its ugly head in community life with sins such as partiality, omission, inhumane treatment, and compromise with the devil (4:7) and the world (4:4). No doubt, some of these issues surfaced in James' community, which provided a platform for James to address wider communities in his letter. He argues for coherence between hearing and doing for social justice in the Christian person and Christian community.

One night I saw a patient with a terrible headache. I went to see him and his story was that he had been to the public hospital and they had sent him away. I asked him if he had any idea why his head was hurting, and he said that he had been shot. He had gotten his SSI check early in the day, was robbed by two fellows, and when he resisted, one of them pulled out a .25 caliber pistol and shot him. In my office, he uncovered his head and when his hair was parted, I could see the entry wound and when cleaned, I could see through the first layer of skull to where the bullet lodged in the second layer. I called an ambulance crew. When they arrived, I introduced myself and informed them of the nature of the problem. All they seemed to hear was the complaint of a headache. "Oh, so you want to

¹⁷ Lewis, '08.

go to the hospital with your headache and get drugs? That's what this is all about," was their response.¹⁸

Obviously, there was no willingness to "see," "hear," or "do" anything to help the wounded victim—even from an ambulance crew.

As the "flip-side" of double-minded persons, James contends for integrity that leads to perfection of the "perfect one" (*teleios anēr*). The adjective "perfect" is used five times in James out of the nineteen times in the whole NT (1:4a, b, 17, 25; 3:2); there are also occurrences of the word-family in 2:8, 22. *Perfect* does not mean a complete moral perfection; rather, it signifies a basic integrity between hearing, willing, and doing, without discrepancy. The *perfect* word-family includes other adjectives: *whole* (*holos*) in 2:10; 3:2, 3:6, *entire, complete* (*holokleros*) in 1:4. It is the expected mature Christian response to the gospel's message. The adjective *perfect/complete* (*teleios*) is also used to modify important nouns: *work* (*ergon* in 1:4; 2:22), *faith* (*pistis* in 2:22), *law* (*nomos* in 1:25; 2:8, 10), and *wisdom* (*sophia* in 1:5, 17). Works by the rich and poor are the necessary complements to faith; where such integrity exists, it reflects "wholeness" or "maturity" (*teleiōsis*) for both poor and rich.

The plea for integrity and unity is grounded in the very nature of God. He is constant and unchanging in his care and compassion (1:17). The affirmation of the one God leads to the social-justice implication that his people should be "one."

Implications

Imperative verbs occur 54 times within the 108 verses in the letter. James' imperatives reflect a socially-sensitive conscience, alert to the disadvantaged. He speaks as a spokesman for the weak and poor—the victims of aggression, corruption, and oppression—and says that true religion constitutes looking out for the weak who are marginalized through no fault of their own. At the same time, the weak poor are not obviated from their work-ethic as well. Genuine faith is no mere verbal confession but also includes complementary works. Such works include sensitivity to the poor, awareness of socio-economic stratification, and commitment to the righteous poor; the poor are also summoned to fine conduct. James reveals his broad social concerns when he speaks of victims of unjust wage agreements and the vulnerable, weak, poor, widows, and orphans. He indicts the rich businessmen, the large landowners, and those who show partiality to the powerful rich. He exposes the sin of omission—not obeying the commandment to love one's neighbor—as a major concern. Further, he envisions the "grand reversal" when the tables will be turned.

In the 21st Century, the letter reveals the need for compassionate concern, sacrifice, and activity on behalf of the marginalized poor. James summons Christian communities to act in sacrificial ways to meet the needs of the poor (within and without the Christian community), without enabling the irresponsible

¹⁸ Lewis, '08.

poor to further their irresponsible lifestyle. James' approach is by no means exhaustive; however, his instructions reveal timeless principles, which need to be acted upon by the Christian community as it reflects upon issues of social justice.

James summons the individual and the community to integrity, unity, and consistency, warning that doubt or double-mindedness allies one with the devil. Love for riches leads to disunity, and social justice requires a life of "completeness," both personally and in the community. Neither the rich nor the poor are immune from responsibility for a "faith that works." Faith that works necessarily entails the giver's sacrifice and the recipient's efforts towards self-help (fine conduct). Christians should constantly search for opportunities to help.

Jim is the president of a business located in the Tidewater area who experienced a major change in his perspective and approach to his relative wealth. In the earlier years of his profitable company, he expressed that he had been driven by numerous selfish and materialistic goals, within his own spiritual context of nominal church attendance. An emergency hospitalization, due to work-related stress, "woke him up" to an honest re-evaluation of his priorities, reflected in his finances. A friend, Dwight, introduced Jim to the Book of Malachi, which Jim believes was marked by the divine indictment, "You have robbed me" (3:8). As a result of his reading the Book of Malachi, Jim gave and continued to give a meaningful sum to the Samaritan House; his Christian commitment meant not only his treasures but also his time and his talents. He incorporated tithing and offerings, not only in his personal life, but within the life of his business. Jim developed and included a "tithing calculator" at the bottom of his company's monthly financial statement to remind him and to quickly calculate for him the amount of his "corporate tithe," thus involving the company and its employees in giving. To maintain some anonymity, Jim only makes donations with corporate checks. Jim continues to be motivated not simply by the command to give, but by the higher principle of "giving back" in light of the blessings and resources he had received. In his involvement with the Samaritan House, Jim has made a personal goal of helping the Samaritan House acquire enough shelters and beds to meet the need. This means that, in the future, a mother and her children will not be turned away for lack of space. He always listens intently for opportunities to "give back" in practical ways. To Jim, helping others has evolved into a divine calling and a life purpose. In his giving, he feels himself to be blessed as he gives to others. Jokingly, he mentioned that perhaps his "giving" is somewhat selfish since he feels he has been the recipient of so much more blessing.¹⁹

¹⁹ A personal interview with a businessman in the Hampton Roads area who wishes to remain anonymous.

Jesus says, "Blessed are they that hear God's word and keep it." James says, "Blessed is the doer in his deed." "Both say the same thing."²⁰ Jim is one such individual who links his faith with doing. Proper hearing, knit together with doing, constitutes genuine faith. "There is a false doing and a false hearing. We cannot examine whether our hearing and our doing are true or false; indeed this will depend precisely on whether or not we entrust this examination entirely to the knowledge and judgment of Jesus."²¹ Thus the empowered Church faces an imperative of economic responsibility that is moved with compassion and courage to provide for the legitimate needs of the impoverished and the needs of the rich, through its witness through words and actions.

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²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962), 170.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, 170.