

## **Conflict Between Rich and Poor**

### An Overview of the Letter of James

The similarity between James and Matthew – particularly the Sermon on the Mount – has long been noted. However, the tendency among conservative exegetes to treat James as a collection of wisdom sayings not directed at any concrete situation is problematic. I believe James contextualizes the teaching of Jesus into a specific – and difficult – situation. Probably writing to Palestinian Jews suffering from a famine,<sup>1</sup> James addresses a situation rife with class conflict. Although no evangelical scholar (besides Justo Gonzales) I know of agrees with my view of James and his audience, the exegetical data is more than sufficient. Stronger claims about other books have been made and accepted on less data.

For example, natural and economic hardship is a satisfying explanation for the ‘trials’ James refers to in 1:2. In a short span of verses, James quickly turns to discuss the poor and the rich (1:9 – 11). Is this a completely new thought or an interrelated one? I believe it is interrelated. The trials come from economic hardship. James challenges the rich in many ways, telling them to glory in their humiliation as they are taught and corrected in the church (1:10 – 11). The most concrete ethical instruction is to provide for orphans and widows; this is an economic issue (1:27). James rebukes his audience for bringing the oppression of the world into the church service (2:1 – 13). In this context, James notes in passing that the rich drag the poor into court (2:6). This seems to be one reason behind the ‘quarrels and conflicts’ in 4:1. After all, no other larger conflict is addressed in James.

Likewise, the entire section about ‘justification by works’ is not a disembodied theological reflection. Still less is it uttered with Paul’s doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ in mind as a foil. ‘Justification’ for both Paul and James is a corporate, communal term. This was another substantial error of the Protestant Reformers. Because of their context in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, they assumed that ‘justification’ means something like ‘how an individual is made right with God,’ or ‘how God declares an individual innocent,’ or ‘how a person becomes a Christian,’ or something like that. Also, because of Luther’s conscience-stricken paranoia, his preoccupation was with how an individual person relates to God. But that is only a secondary aspect of ‘justification.’

The Jewish and biblical framework for understanding ‘justification’ is God’s covenant with Israel at the cusp of their return from exile, i.e. expecting ‘resurrection.’ The word ‘justification’, which might mean ‘vindication’ in its simplest form (e.g. Rom.3:4), has an eschatological flavor when applied to us, referring to participation in the resurrected new covenant community that has ‘returned from exile’ and has been vindicated in an ultimate, eschatological sense. N.T. Wright has stressed that ‘justification’ is not an individualistic idea; it requires the concept of covenant community. Hence, when Paul is speaking in Romans about how Abraham is the father of a community of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom.4:16 – 17), he has in mind the word ‘justification,’ and it is linked most organically to the resurrection of Jesus, in which his people collectively are bound up: indeed, ‘he was raised for our justification’ (Rom.4:25). This is connected to Old Testament links between resurrection and justification, for example, in Ezekiel 36 – 37, when being given a new heart in chapter 36 is identified with being resurrected in chapter 37, and being resurrected is identified with being vindicated, that is, justified. Biblically, justification has to do with joining the true Israel, the covenant community, on the other side of her exile and death, an exile and death that Jesus takes on at the cross and emerges through in his resurrection. Paul says of the Gentiles, ‘you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise...[but] you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God’s household.’ (Eph.2:12, 19) Just as the old covenant community was redeemed out of Egypt as a community to be a community, so the new covenant community was redeemed out of the Law, sin, and death as a community to be a community.

This teaching on the new covenant community situates James and Paul in their proper contexts. For Paul, discussion about justification occurs in the context of ethnic and cultural tension in the community, in his time between Jew and Gentile. N.T. Wright says, ‘His polemic against ‘works of the law’ is not directed against those who attempted to earn covenant membership through keeping the Jewish law (such people do not seem to have existed in the 1st century) but against those who sought to demonstrate their membership in the covenant through obeying the Jewish law. Against those people Paul argues (a) that the law cannot in fact be kept perfectly – it merely shows up sin; and (b) that this attempt would reduce the covenant to a single race, those who possess the Jewish law, whereas God desires a world-wide family.’ (*New Dictionary of Theology*, IVP, p.360)

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<sup>1</sup> We know from Acts 11:28 that a famine hit the Mediterranean region during the early years of Barnabus and Saul, prompting relief to be gathered for the brethren in Judea. James hints at a famine in 1:11, ‘For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass...’ and in 5:17 – 18 when he observes that Elijah’s prayers stopped the rain for three and a half years and started them again.

For Paul, preserving the unity of the Jewish and Gentile believers is absolutely essential to the gospel. This is the main thrust of Ephesians, not least when Paul talks about the ‘dividing wall of hostility’ between Jew and Gentile being torn down, because all who believe in Christ are now placed ‘in Christ,’ and there is no division ‘in Christ’ (2:11 – 22). Disrupting the unity of the body is rebuked in the severest possible terms. It allows Satan to gain a foothold in the church (4:27) and grieves the Holy Spirit (4:30). But for centuries, Protestant commentators on Paul have emphasized Romans 1 – 8 and Galatians, and misinterpreted those letters as if Paul were really talking about ‘individual salvation’ and its precise mechanics (I elaborate on this below). So too, statements like ‘He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus’ (Phil.1:8) were applied to the individual, even though they are really about community (e.g. the argument between Euodia and Syntyche; see also Gordon Fee’s commentary on Philippians). If the Protestant Reformers had started with Ephesians, which is closest in succinctness to Paul’s native concerns, they would have oriented Paul’s theology around the Christian community and horizontal reconciliation, not merely around ‘individual salvation.’ In Ephesians, Paul is not dealing with some pressing problem but rather giving God’s grand vision for the church. In fact, some manuscripts have a blank space instead of the destination ‘Ephesus’ in the address, suggesting that what we call ‘Ephesians’ was really designed as a more general chain letter. This would have had dramatic consequences. For Paul as well as the rest of the NT, horizontal reconciliation with others (especially across ethnic, racial, and national lines) goes hand in hand with vertical reconciliation with God because of the reality of the church as a new family stretching across national, ethnic, and racial lines.

James has the same theology of the covenant people. Because James is addressing the issue of favoritism between rich and poor in the new covenant community, he invokes the challenge of ‘justification by works.’ This does not mean that you must earn salvation from God by doing ‘meritorious’ things. Neither does it mean that we must achieve a state of ‘moral perfection.’ Rather, it has to do with whether a person has really committed to living in the reality of Jesus’ covenant community. The unity of the covenant community makes favoritism in the community a sin calling into question one’s membership in the first place. If a rich man gets favored treatment over a poor man, that is the sin of partiality, which violates the principle of unity within the covenant community (2:4, 9). Partiality and favoritism, as compared with murder and adultery (2:11), seem at first like small sins of omission, like merely forgetting to do help as opposed to intentionally hurting someone. But in reality, James says, partiality and favoritism are gross sins of commission *just like* murder and adultery. ‘For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all’ (2:10).

We can make the parallel between James and Matthew even clearer at this point. Echoing Matthew’s conceptual language where *realms* of mercy seem to be emphasized, James says, ‘For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy [in this context, to the poor]; mercy triumphs over judgment’ (2:13). One either lives in the realm of God’s mercy and showing mercy, or in the realm of showing judgment and therefore incurring God’s judgment. That is the organic link. What James calls ‘justification by works,’ Matthew calls ‘forgive as you have been forgiven,’ and its converse, ‘if you do not forgive men, your Father will not forgive your transgressions.’ Favoritism is a lack of mercy and a failure to live in the realm of mercy.

The ethical trajectory becomes clear. If a brother or sister is without clothing or in need of daily food, and gets only lip service and not real assistance (2:15 – 16), that also violates the principle of unity within the covenant community and demonstrates a lack of having received God’s mercy. That’s why James calls it ‘dead faith’ (2:17). The partiality revealed in favoring a rich person in some social setting, or conversely, in not making efforts to care for the neglected, is a gross sin. It is a failure to love as Jesus loves. It is a capitulation to the selfish relational patterns of the world, which God breaks through and countermands by loving us in and through Jesus. The question is not, ‘How can you teach God’s free grace and say we are obligated to give to the poor?’ The question is quite the opposite: ‘How can you teach God’s free grace and *not* say we are obligated to the poor?’ In James, favoritism against the poor reveals a fundamental flaw in one’s spiritual development, and can only call into question one’s participation in the covenant community – i.e. one’s very salvation – in the first place. This is exactly what James does in chapters 1 and 2. This is also Paul’s logic when he talks about how believers must work towards unity and reconciliation in the body; it is a logical outgrowth of our union and reconciliation with Jesus (e.g. Ephesians, Romans 12 – 15, etc.). The community of Jesus is marked outwardly by a different social ethic than others. The evidence of our identification with Jesus’ community (i.e. our ‘justification’) is by such relationship.

That James thinks of ‘justification’ as ‘how to join the new covenant community’ is evidenced by his use of Abraham sacrificing Isaac and Rahab receiving the Israelite spies as examples. At first these examples strike us as utterly strange. Is this how ‘works’ justify us, according to James? Certainly if we were reading James as if he were preeminently saying ‘earn your way to God,’ these examples would be extremely bad ones. Abraham’s act was not simply a ‘moral’ act; he was not even living under the Mosaic Law, and his willingness to sacrifice his son would have been forbidden under the Mosaic Law. As Kierkegaard said, it was beyond standard categories of morality, and, given the uniqueness of Abraham’s experience, it would be hard to understand how he serves as a model for us.

Rahab's act cannot be placed in standard categories of morality either. She harbored Israel's spies – how does that have any bearing on the rich/poor issue? But closer examination reveals James' clear-headedness. Rahab's act was a gesture of joining the covenant community, Israel. In siding with the spies, she switched allegiances from the community of Jericho to God's covenant community, Israel. Thus, her example is appropriate. She demonstrated the 'works' commensurate with joining the covenant community. And Abraham's act of offering Isaac is also appropriate if James – and if not all early Christians as a whole (e.g. Romans 4:16 – 25) – understood Abraham as identifying himself with the 'covenant community' that flowed out of the resurrection of a supernaturally born son? He did not just 'intellectually believe' that God's word is authoritative. He acted on that word of promise and, believing that God must be able to resurrect Isaac (Heb.11:19), identified himself with the family-community that must emerge with Isaac on the other side of Isaac's resurrection. That resurrection faith then becomes a precursor of the Christian faith. Abraham identifies himself with a resurrected Isaac and the covenant community flowing out from a resurrected Isaac, which has profound parallels with the renewed covenant community flowing out from and participating in the resurrected Jesus. This supports N.T. Wright's argument that 'justification' must be understood not individualistically, but with reference to the community of faith. Here, it supports my argument that James teaches that among the people of God, wealth disparities must be addressed.

James seems to divide his address between actions and speech at chapter 3, perhaps employing a Hebrew merism referring to the totality of what proceeds out of a person. In addressing speech, James says that some [the rich landowners] speak arrogantly, saying that they could escape hardship [the famine] by going to the city and even making money in the process! They hoard up riches, he continues, to the detriment of their laborers and, because of their sin, themselves (4:13 – 5:6). If the challenge, 'Come now, you who say' in 4:13 is addressed to the same people as in 5:1, 'Come now, you rich,' which is a reasonable assertion, then the lines seem to be drawn between wealthy landowning families who have enough mobility to escape the situation and poor tenant farmers who do not. The arrogant talk of the mobile rich exacerbates the tension in the Christian community, just as talk about expensive vacations, new business opportunities, house décor, and lunches in fine restaurants would be divisive in churches today. The rebuke to the rich cannot be missed, nor can it be downplayed in our contemporary world that is also rife with (often unspoken) class conflict.

What is especially surprising, however, is that James also challenges the poor to rejoice in their suffering and low position (1:2 – 4, 9), to renounce jealousy in favor of wisdom and gentleness (3:13 – 4:4), to not pray for wealth with certain evil motives ('so that you may spend it on your pleasures' in 4:3). James' dramatic warning to the rich envisions the wealth of the current creation rotting or being burned in fire (5:1 – 3; cf. 2 Pet.3:7) but this is audible to all, which reinforces my contention that those who are aligned or identified with the coming new heavens and new earth through Jesus must live as pilgrims and aliens because the judgment preceding it will overtake all those who are aligned or identified with the current world. Indeed, James cuts through the materialistic desires of both rich and poor by telling both groups to await the coming of the Lord, accepting with endurance and patience the present suffering (5:7 – 11). Like Jesus, James challenges both rich and poor, demonstrated by the sheer number of quotations or allusions to Jesus' preaching. He does make the advantaged share their resources with the disadvantaged. He challenges the poor as well, which is only possible by addressing the conflict in the context of the discontinuity between the old creation and the new.