



Who is this James? He is probably the “brother of the Lord,” barely mentioned in the Gospel, with regard to his mother (Mk 6:3; 15:40; 16:1). And yet, he was privileged to have the risen Jesus appear to him (1 Cor 15:7). It also seems that when he is about to go underground, Peter entrusts the Church of Jerusalem to him (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Later on, James appears to have been responsible for all the Christian communities, with a majority of Jews, that were established in Palestine, Syria and Cilicia (see Acts 15:13-29).

Of all the apostles, James was the most attached to Jewish traditions (the opposite of Paul). Yet, although Paul harshly criticized James’ associates, he seemed to have more than personal respect for James. In addressing the faithful dispersed outside Palestine, James is teaching them simple and practical things inspired from the wisdom of the Old Testament. We recognize authentic religion by the way we live and treat people around us.

We cannot fail to see that the passage where James shows that faith is nothing without works (2:14-26) contradicts, at least seemingly, Paul’s declarations about justification by faith in Galatians 5 and Romans 4. However, a careful study shows that James was familiar with Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians when he wrote his letter. Paul had forcefully declared that faith is nothing without love (1 Cor 13:2) and James simply approved. Without contradicting James, in Galatians and Romans, Paul emphasized that faith purifies the heart of pagans and Jews, long before we accomplish the works of love that God has prepared beforehand for us to practice (Eph 2:10).

What is evident from the many contacts between the letters of Peter, James and Paul is that the Church was not a galaxy of dispersed communities set in their own interpretations of the faith and their attachment to a particular apostle—something we read all too often in works of the last century such as the—“Johannine circles,” the “Pauline communities,” the “Lukan communities,” etc. The letters of the apostles traveled very fast and people received them from one end of the Mediterranean basin to the other. The Church of the apostles was a reality even when the apostles confronted one another.

Here, Christians are called the twelve tribes dispersed among the nations. In fact, the term “Diaspora,” that is to say, “dispersion” was used to refer to Jews who had settled outside their homeland. In view of what we have said, James must have written his letter in the year 56 A.D., between 1 Corinthians and Galatians. In any case, we know that James was stoned to death in the year 62 A.D.

Endure trials patiently

1 James, a servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ, sends greetings to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

• ²Consider yourselves fortunate, my brothers and sisters, when you meet with every kind of trial, ³for you know, that the testing of your faith makes you steadfast. ⁴Let your steadfastness become perfect, with deeds, that you, yourselves, may be perfect and blameless, without any defect.

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all easily and unconditionally. ⁶But ask with faith, not doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave driven and tossed on the sea by the wind. ⁷Such a person should not expect anything from the Lord, since the doubter has two minds ⁸and his conduct will always be insecure.

⁹Let the believer who is poor, boast, in being uplifted, ¹⁰and let the rich one boast, in being humbled, because he will pass away like the flower of the field. ¹¹The sun rises and its heat dries

the grass; the flower withers and its beauty vanishes. So, too, will the rich person fade away, even in the midst of his pursuits.

¹²Happy are those who patiently endure trials, because, afterward, they will receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to those who love him. ¹³No one, when tempted, should say, "This temptation comes from God." God is never tempted, and he can never tempt anyone. ¹⁴Instead, each of us is lured, and enticed, by our own evil desire. ¹⁵Once this desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when fully grown, gives birth to death.

• ¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved. ¹⁷Every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of Light, in whom there is no change, or shadow of a change. ¹⁸By his own will, he gave us life, through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of offering to him, among his creatures.

¹⁹My beloved, be quick to hear but slow to speak, and slow to anger, ²⁰for human anger does not fulfill the

Wis
5:15;
2Tim 4:8

Sir
15:11

1Cor
10:13;
Mt 6:13

Rom
6:23

1Jn 1:5;
1Tim
6:16;
1P 1:23;
Jn 1:12

Pro
10:19;
1P 2:1

Mt 7:7;
21:21

Jer 9:22

Isa 40:6-7

• **1.2** What is most impressive at the beginning of the letter is the firmness of faith. James is a man who does not hesitate and we feel very reassured by his conviction: *ask God because he gives to everyone. Fortunate when you meet with every kind of trial.*

The testing of your faith (v. 3). We are not in this world to have a good time. What matters is to take advantage of the time God gives us to grow and mature as persons. The person who has not suffered knows very little. Oftentimes, those who have suffered do not realize that they owe the best in themselves to their having had to overcome a thousand difficulties.

To save the poor and the afflicted does not consist so much in comforting them or giving them bread as in helping them to face their destiny, to realize themselves through their own efforts and to discover they are helpless if they do not first acknowledge their brothers and sisters and act with them.

If any of you is lacking in wisdom (v. 5). God has placed in our midst all that we need to solve our problems. The wisdom that makes us

be responsible for our destiny instead of being passive comes from him.

Ask with faith (v. 6). The one who knows what are the obstacles from which God wishes to save him will be the one who has no hesitation in asking with faith.

No one, when tempted, should say (v. 13). Most people are secretly resentful toward God and do not miss an opportunity to blame him for their own mistakes.

• **16.** *The Father of Light in whom there is no change or shadow of a change* (v. 17). Because we are inconsistent, James invites us to look to the Father who does not change and whose holiness and happiness are touched by nothing. What an amazing thing: in his eternity, the Father enjoys our presence, while we who live in time do not yet know how to focus on him. We must acquire the same firmness and constancy that are in God.

He gave us life (v. 18). This affirmation will be developed in 1 Peter 1. It is a reminder of Baptism through which we received new life. James

justice of God. ²¹ So get rid of any filth, and reject the prevailing evil, and welcome the word that has been planted in you, and has the power to save you.

²² Be doers of the word, and not just hearers, lest you deceive yourselves.

²³ The hearer, who does not become a doer, is like that one, who looked at himself in the mirror; ²⁴ he looked, and then promptly forgot what he was like. ²⁵ But those who fix their gaze on the perfect law of freedom, and hold onto it, not listening and then forgetting, but acting on it, will find blessing on their deeds.

²⁶ Those who think they are religious, but do not restrain their tongue, deceive themselves, and their religion is in vain. ²⁷ In the sight of God, our Father, pure and blameless religion lies in helping the orphans, and widows in their need, and keeping oneself from the world's corruption.

Treat the rich and the poor equally

2 • ¹ My brothers and sisters, if you truly believe in our glorified Lord, Jesus Christ, you will not discriminate

between persons. ² Suppose a person enters the synagogue where you are assembled, dressed magnificently and wearing a gold ring; at the same time, a poor person enters dressed in rags. ³ If you focus your attention on the well-dressed and say, "Come and sit in the best seat," while, to the poor one you say, "Stay standing, or else sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not, in fact, made a distinction between the two? Have you not judged, using a double standard?

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, did God not choose the poor of this world to receive the riches of faith, and to inherit the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ Yet, you despise them! Is it not the rich who are against you, and drag you to court? ⁷ Do they not insult the holy name of Christ by which you are called?

⁸ If you keep the law of the kingdom, according to Scripture: *Love your neighbor as yourself*, you do well; ⁹ but if you make distinctions between persons, you break the law, and are condemned by the same law.

draws this conclusion: we must keep the word of God, meditate on it to find out what it demands of us. It is not enough to have improved our lives for a while in preparation for Baptism; we must persevere on the path of goodness.

• **2.1** *Whoever makes a distinction between persons* (v. 4) is not Christian.

Distinction of class, of color: there is never a reason for showing favoritism and not respecting the rights of each person, for making her wait or treating her less well. There is at stake an instinct for justice that is linked with faith.

James speaks of distinctions within the Church and alas! Often it is there that they tenaciously cling. If in many countries the Church is much frequented by those who are socially well off, better educated, it is surely because of its choices: our practices have cast aside others until they are no longer seen.

Did God not choose the poor of this world to receive the riches of faith? (v. 5). The apostles who are our undisputed masters in faith were poor with regard to money and influence,

but they were sufficiently rich in faith to sign it with their blood.

James says that the rich profane the name of Christ. He speaks perhaps of the rich unbelievers who ridicule the simple faithful, or perhaps of the wealthy Christians whose way of life draws criticism of the name of Christ. They profane the name of Christ and bring contempt on the Church.

James invites the Church to examine itself on the way we treat each other in our institutions: with whom are the pastors of the Church usually found, who are those with whom they feel at ease and in whom they confide. What terrible truth would be revealed by an investigation of these points!

The law of freedom (v. 12): Paul, John, Peter and James all agree on the point that Christians cannot be satisfied with simply obeying the commandments, or respecting a master's will in order not to get in trouble. No, Christians must have the free and intelligent generosity of volunteers whose only law is their commitment to Christ.

Lk 8:21;
1Jn 3:17

Mt 5:17;
Ps 19:8;
Jn 13:17

22:21

1Cor
1:26;
Zep 2:3;
Rev 2:9

1P 4:11

Lev
19:18;
Mt 22:39

Lev
19:15;
Mt 5:19

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails, in one aspect, is guilty of breaking it all. ¹¹For he who said, *Do not commit adultery*, also said, *Do not kill*. If, then, you do not commit adultery but you do commit murder, you have broken the law. ¹²Therefore, speak and behave like people who are going to be judged by the law of freedom. ¹³There will be justice, without mercy, for those who have not shown mercy, whereas, mercy has nothing to fear of judgment.

20:13-14;
Dt 5:
17-18

Mt 5:7;
18:34

Faith is shown in action

• ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, to profess faith, without showing works? Such faith has no power to save you. ¹⁵If a brother or sister is in need of clothes or food, ¹⁶and one of you says, “May things go well for you; be warm and satisfied,” without attending to their material needs, what good is that? ¹⁷So, it is, for faith without deeds: it is totally dead.

2:24;
Mt 25:41;
Gal 5:6

1Jn 3:17

¹⁸Say to whoever challenges you, “You have faith and I have good deeds; show me your faith apart from actions and I, for my part, will show you my faith in the way I act.” ¹⁹Do you believe there is one God? Well enough, but do not forget, that the

Mk 1:24

demons, also, believe, and tremble with fear!

²⁰You foolish one, do you have to be convinced, that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Think of our father Abraham. Was he not justified by the act of offering his son Isaac on the altar? ²²So you see, his faith was active, along with his deeds, and became perfect by what he did. ²³The word of Scripture was thus fulfilled, *Abraham believed in God so he was considered a righteous person and he was called the friend of God*.

Gen 22:9

Gen 15:6

²⁴So you see, a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone. ²⁵Like-wise, we read of Rahab, the prostitute, that she was acknowledged and saved, because she welcomed the spies, and showed them another way to leave.

Rom 4:12

Jos 2:4;
6:17

²⁶So, just as the body is dead without its spirit, so faith, without deeds is also dead.

Gal 5:6

Sins of the tongue

3 ¹My brothers and sisters, don't all be teachers! You know that, as teachers, we will be judged most strictly; ²in fact, we make mistakes, like everybody else. A person who commits no offense in speech is perfect, and capable of ruling the whole

Sir 14:1

• 14. It is necessary to have faith to be saved, but following Christ cannot be theoretical; it must be shown in action, in deeds. Christ himself says the same thing in Matthew 7:21: “Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Let us look at the two examples that James takes from the Old Testament and let us compare them with Hebrews 11:31, and above all with Romans 4 (Gal 3). It seems that James and Paul draw opposite teachings from the same examples. Paul says: Abraham was justified by faith and not by following the law. James, on the other hand, says that they were saved by putting their faith into practice. Actually, in speaking of practices, Paul is thinking about the religious rites and observances of the Jews that are useless for salvation, and he says that faith is at the root of all Christian life. James, in speak-

ing of practices, is thinking about deeds inspired by love. Paul said the same when he wrote: “Faith works through love” (Gal 5:6).

These apparently contrary affirmations of James and Paul were widely discussed at the beginning of the Reformation, when certain commentators bluntly affirmed that a person is saved by faith alone. Yet it would not be sufficient to show how we can achieve reconciliation between the words of Paul and James. There is clearly with them quite different ways of seeing and feeling and that is due as much to the diversity of human temperaments as to the richness of the Christian experience, which is not always the same for everyone. These real differences that we find even among the apostles encourage us to accept that others may think and express their faith in ways different from our own.

self. ³We put a bit into the horse's mouth to master it and, with this, we control its whole body. ⁴The same is true of ships: however big they are, driven by strong winds, they are guided by a tiny rudder. ⁵In the same way, the tongue is a tiny part of the body, but it is capable of great things.

A small flame is enough to set a huge forest on fire. ⁶The tongue is a similar flame; it is, in itself, a whole world of evil. It infects the whole being, and sets fire to our world, with the very fire of hell. ⁷Wild animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures of every kind are, and have been ruled, by the human species. ⁸Nobody, however, can control the tongue; it is an untiring whip, full of deadly poison. ⁹We use it to bless God, our Father, and also, to curse those made in God's likeness.

¹⁰From the same mouth come both blessing and curse.

Brothers and sisters, this should not be the case. ¹¹Can both fresh and salt water gush from the same source?

¹²Can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine give figs? Neither is the sea able to give fresh water.

True wisdom

• ¹³If you consider yourself wise and learned, show it by your good life, and let your actions, in all humility, be an example for others. ¹⁴But if your heart is full of bitter jealousy, and ambition, do not try to show off; that would be covering up the truth; ¹⁵this kind of wisdom does not come from above, but from the world, and it is earthly and devilish. ¹⁶Wherever there is jealousy and ambition, you will also find discord, and all that is evil. ¹⁷Instead, the wisdom that comes from above is pure and peace-loving. Persons with this wisdom show understanding, and listen to advice; they are full of compassion and good works; they are impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers, who sow peace, reap a harvest of justice.

¹Cor 3:3;
Eph 4:31

Mt 5:9;
Phil 1:11;
Heb
12:11

Wicked ambitions

4 • ¹What causes these fights and quarrels among you? Is it not your cravings, that make war within your own selves? ²When you long for something you cannot have, you kill for it, and when you do not get what

Rom
7:23;
1P 2:11;
Mt 7:7

• **3.13** What is wisdom? Let us read the Wisdom Books of the Scriptures if we wish to know something of wisdom. They put us on the trail of a wisdom that is a gift of God (1 Cor 1:5; Eph 1:9), which is acquired by prayer (Wis 9; Sir 51:13; Col 1:9), perseverance in meditation on the word of God (2 Tim 3:17), the purification of the heart through ordinary living. James does not speak of a theoretical wisdom, but of practical wisdom.

• **4.1** *You pray with the wrong motive* (v. 3). James tells us that prayer obtains for us things that enable us to respond to God's plan (see 1:5-8). Our prayers will not be heard if *love for the world* takes the place of God in our hearts.

What is the *friendship with the world* (v. 4) that prevents our being heard? We explain this in more detail in the commentary on John 3:17 and 1 John 2:15. God asks us to love all the things he created, viewing them as means of reaching him, and to reject what does not serve

this purpose. *Loving the world* is wishing for and clinging to things, without looking beyond them for God himself and the brothers and sisters that he gave us. It is adultery in the same sense as the phrase from the Gospel: "No one can serve two masters" (Mt 6:24). We cannot divide our love between God and the world; neither can we ask God to help us satisfy egotistical ambitions.

Criticizing others (v. 11) is the same as despising the law of love. We must see, and at times say, what is wrong in an action, but we must not judge the responsibility of others, nor their intentions, which God alone knows. God is the only judge. See Romans 14:4 and Matthew 7:1.

You boast of your plans (v. 16). We all make many plans: to earn more, to buy things, to have a good time. What is serious about this is that we forget meanwhile to do good. We know it has to be done and we know how to do it, but what we do not know is if we will have time to accomplish it. We may die without having done what mattered most.

you desire, you squabble and fight. The fact is, you do not have what you want, because you do not pray for it. ³You pray for something, and you do not get it, because you pray with the wrong motive, of indulging your pleasures. ⁴You adulterers! Don't you know, that making friends with the world makes you enemies of God? Therefore, whoever chooses to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy.

Mt 6:24;
1Jn 2:15

⁵Can you not see the point of the saying in Scripture: "The longing of the spirit, he sent to dwell in us, is a jealous longing?" ⁶But God has something better to give, and Scripture also says, *God opposes the proud but he gives his favor to the humble.* ⁷Give in, then, to God; resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw close to God and he will come close to you. Clean your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you doubters. ⁹Recognize your distress, be miserable and weep. Turn your laughter into tears and your joy into sadness. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will raise you up.

Pro 3:34

Eph 6:11;
1P 5:6;
Mal 3:7

Job 5:11;
Mt 23:12

Lev 19:16;
Mt 7:1

¹¹Brothers and sisters, do not criticize one another. Anyone who speaks against, or condemns another, speaks against the law, and condemns the law. If, however, you condemn the law, you are no longer an observer of the law, but a judge of it. ¹²There is only one lawgiver and one judge: he who has the power to save or condemn. So you, who are you, to judge your neighbor?

Rom 2:1;
14:4

¹³Listen now, you who speak like this, "Today or tomorrow we will go off to this city and spend a year there; we will do business and make money."

Pro 27:1;
Lk 12:18

¹⁴You have no idea what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? No more than a mist, which appears for a moment and then disappears. ¹⁵Instead of this, you should say, "God willing, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶But no! You boast of your plans: this brazen pride is wicked. ¹⁷Anyone who knows what is good, and does not do it, sins.

The misfortunes of the rich

5 • ¹So, now, for what concerns the rich, cry and weep, for the misfortunes that are coming upon you. ²Your riches are rotting, and your clothes, eaten up by the moths. ³Your silver and gold have rusted, and their rust grows into a witness against you. It will consume your flesh, like fire, for having piled up riches, in these, the last days.

Lk 6:24;
Mt 6:19

Pro 16:27;
11:4;
11:28

⁴You deceived the workers who harvested your fields, but, now, their wages cry out to the heavens. The reapers' complaints have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You lived in luxury and pleasure in this world, thus, fattening yourselves for the day of slaughter. ⁶You have easily condemned, and killed the innocent since they offered no resistance.

Lev 19:13;
Dt 24:14;
Mal 3:5

Is 5:7;
Jer 25:34;
Lk 16:19

Wis 2:10

Look forward to the Lord's coming

⁷Be patient then, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. See how the

Lk 18:1;
Heb 10:36;
Dt 11:14;
Mk 4:26

• **5.1** The rich will lose all they have stockpiled through injustice. Just as serious as having stolen from the salaries of workers and having condemned those who spoke of justice is the sin against hope. "The *last days* already came and you were looking for riches!" The last days are those that began with the coming of Christ, with the kingdom already there. James sees the second coming of the Lord as if it was imminent and it is the only way to rightly judge riches.

What was taking place in the poor civilization of James' time is happening again today. The prosperity of a quarter of the world depends on the system that leaves two billion people in misery.

In our countries money destroys hope in the Christian meaning of the word; life is considered as a fortune to be enjoyed by oneself, without accepting responsibilities, beginning with the transmission of life. Far removed from us,

sower waits for the precious fruits of the earth, looking forward, patiently, to the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You, also, be patient, and do not lose heart, because the Lord's coming is near.

1Thes
3:1

⁹Beloved, do not fight among yourselves and you will not be judged. See, the judge is already at the door.

Mk13:29

¹⁰Take for yourselves, as an example of patience, the suffering of the prophets, who spoke in the Lord's name.

Mt 5:11

¹¹See how those who were patient are called blessed. You have heard of the patience of Job and know how the Lord dealt with him in the end. *For the Lord is merciful and shows compassion.*

34:6

¹²Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth, or make a habit of swearing. Let your yes be yes and your no be no, lest you become liable for judgment.

Mt 5:34

the safeguarding of our privileges involves, like a series of cascades, the unjust death of millions of people because of famine, oppression and wars.

• 13. We know, through James' words, that the Church continued—and must continue today—Christ's ministry to the sick. Salvation includes both physical and spiritual health. The Gospel shows us that the latter is the most important and God always grants it, although he does not always restore physical health.

In the Gospel, Jesus lays his hands on the sick and when he sends his missionaries, he asks them to lay their hands on the sick or to anoint them with oil (Mk 6:13 and 16:18). The laying on of hands is like communicating to another person the power that will heal him, in the name of Christ and with his authority. As to oil, it was used in those days as a remedy. The two signs—*anointing and laying of hands*—accompany prayer.

The *elders* are those in charge of Christian communities. They were lay people but had been charged with the direction of the community, the celebration of Baptism, presiding at the Eucharist. They must visit the sick and animate the community prayer for them, requesting God to cure them. At the same time they must invite the sick to recognize their sins, and prepare them to receive the grace of God.

When the Church speaks of the sacrament of the sick, it refers only to the anointing with

The sick

• ¹³Are any among you, discouraged? They should pray. Are any of you happy? They should sing songs to God. ¹⁴If anyone is sick, let him call on the elders of the Church. They shall pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer said in faith will save the sick person; the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

Acts
16:25Mk 6:13;
Sir
38:14

• ¹⁶There will be healing, if you confess your sins to one another, and pray for each other. The prayer of the upright man has great power, provided he perseveres. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being, like ourselves, and when he prayed, earnestly, for it not to rain, no rain fell for three and a half years. ¹⁸Then he prayed again: the

Pro
28:13;
1Jn 1:81K 17:1;
Rev 11:6

oil done by someone who has officially received the power for this sacrament (up to now, only priests can administer this sacrament). This in no way excludes leaders of the Christian communities from praying, from anointing, and laying hands on the sick. When they do this with faith in the name of the Church, there is an increase in God's intervention in healing the sick, thus preparing them for conversion.

It has been a great error in past days to reserve the anointing of the sick to the dying and to call it *extreme unction*. It is also a serious error to wait until the sick person is unconscious in order not to frighten him into thinking that death may be near.

See the commentary on Luke 10:9.

• 16. Jesus said to Peter: "What you forgive on earth will be forgiven in heaven" (Mt 16:19). He said the same thing to the apostles, "What you forgive on earth..." (Jn 20:23). He says the same to the Church (Mt 18:18). It is the task of pastors of the Church to decide on the reconciliation of sinners with the community—and with God. Yet, in many cases, we have more need for the forgiveness of one or several persons whom we have offended, and we must ask for it with simplicity: the forgiveness of a brother or sister in the faith will be the forgiveness of God.

Likewise, it is good to confess our faults to those who are able to understand us. The trust of the one and the mercy of the other: nothing more is needed for God to be in the middle.

sky yielded rain and the earth produced its fruit.

person brings him back to it,²⁰ be sure of this: he who brings back a sinner from the wrong way, will save his soul from death and *win forgiveness for many sins*.

Mt 18:15;
Gal 6:1 ¹⁹Brothers, if any one of you strays far away from the truth, and another

Pro
10:12;
1P 4:8