

# Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of “Perfection”

BY PATRICK J. HARTIN

**James challenges us to live faithfully, to “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Such wholeness or completeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith.**

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**O**ur world has an obsession with perfection. We are bombarded by commercials on television, advertisements on the Internet, and communications on social media websites that offer hope for attaining the perfect body, the perfect partner, the perfect house, the perfect job. The Pulitzer-Prize author Chris Hedges has pointed out that science and reason have been so elevated within our culture that society believes it is on the path to perfectibility. This ignores the fundamental understanding of human nature and sin:

The concept of sin is a stark acknowledgment that we can never be omnipotent, that we are bound and limited by human flaws and self-interest. The concept of sin is a check on the dreams of a perfect world. It prevents us from believing in our own perfectibility or the illusion that the material advances of science and technology equal an intrinsic moral improvement in our species.... The secular utopians of the twenty-first century have also forgotten they are human.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately the search for perfection is rooted in the human desire for happiness. Augustine captured the essence of this human desire for happiness in his prayer to God, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is a certain unease in talking about perfection in the context of our discipleship. In the first instance, it runs

counter to the foundational concept of Christianity that we are all God's children in need of God's grace to sustain our lives. We cannot attain our own perfection without God's help. Further, as Hedges points out above, such a concept of perfection leads us to deny the reality of sin in the world. Since we are human, we are all capable of sinning, of turning from God to place trust in oneself. In this article I will examine the concept of perfection in the letter of James to illustrate how it applies equally to us today in the twenty-first century.

## **PURITY AND PERFECTION IN JAMES**

Like the Book of Proverbs, James embraces the Hebrew concept of Wisdom that comes from God to enlighten believers in a practical way about how to lead their lives.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

*James 3:13, 17*

The letter's opening address defines the ethos or identity of James's audience, "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1). In the Greek text, James uses the article in conjunction with the word "Dispersion" to show he has in mind a literal understanding of the Diaspora as those areas outside Palestine where the people of Israel live.<sup>3</sup> Further, the title, "the twelve tribes" refers to the people of Israel who trace their origins back to the twelve sons of Jacob (see Exodus 24:4; 28:21; and 39:14). Since the time of the great King David, the people of Israel have been hoping for the reconstitution of their twelve-tribe kingdom, as Ezekiel 37:21-22 states: "Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land...."

In this opening address, James expresses hope in the fulfillment of this twelve-tribe kingdom. James goes farther by identifying his audience as "the first fruits of [God's] creatures" (James 1:18); they are descendants of the people of Israel and are those who have been reborn ("first fruits") as followers of Jesus Christ. James situates them as living outside of Palestine. His admonitions (ethics) strive to socialize this audience and form their identity (ethos). In effect, he says to them: "You are part of that people of God stretching way back to the patriarch Abraham and now given a new identity as the 'first fruits' of God's creatures in the person of Jesus Christ." For James, his instructions remind them of who they are. Their identity requires them to lead their lives in a specific way. By embracing these guides to action, the members of the community show their distinctiveness from the wider society.

The epistle is characterized by the frequent appearance of the adjective “perfect” (*teleios*).<sup>4</sup> I have examined elsewhere the background to James’s use of this word in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Septuagint.<sup>5</sup> The Septuagint used the Greek adjective *teleios* (as well as the adjective *amōmos*) to translate the Hebrew word *tamim*.<sup>6</sup> An examination of these words points to an origin within the Hebrew cult, especially that of the sacrificial Temple

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worship. Cultic laws required all offerings to be free of any defect, “unblemished” (*teleios*). For example: “Your lamb shall be *without blemish* (*teleios*), a year-old male” (Exodus 12:5). This concept was analogously applied to other dimensions of life. For example, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless (*teleios*) in his generation” (Genesis 6:9).

The conceptual meaning of *teleios* gives expression to three essential dimensions. First, it expresses the idea of wholeness or completeness, of a being remaining true to its original constitution. Second, it refers to giving oneself wholeheartedly and unconditionally to God in the context of God’s people. When persons were grounded in this relationship, they would be whole, perfect. Third, such a wholehearted dedication to the Lord is expressed through obedience to God’s will. Since the Torah expresses God’s will for God’s people, a wholehearted dedication to the Lord embraces a life led in obedience to the Torah, to the laws of the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

This threefold understanding of *teleios* explains James’s meaning. His first appeal to believers occurs while their faith was being tested (James 1:2-4). Perseverance in time of trials produces “a perfect work” (1:4, KJV). The second use of the term *teleios* in this verse—“so that you may be *perfect* [*teleios*] and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4, ESV)<sup>8</sup>—refers directly to believers who persevere and remain true to their faith in the midst of trials. They are perfect and complete, as are unblemished offerings in the Israelite cult that are offered to the Lord. They are people whose faith is undivided and who conform to their original constitution as God intended. The cultic dimension continues when James says believers hold a special place in God’s plan of creation: they are “the first fruits of God’s creatures” (1:18). This cultic image is a reminder of Israel’s offering of the first fruits of their fields and flocks to God. Against this background, the hearers/readers as the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” are the first of God’s creatures to begin the reconstitution of God’s people.<sup>9</sup>

For James, perfection is a search for wholeness as an individual and as a community in relationship to the one God who guides them through the Torah. The rhetorical aim of James's advice is the socialization of a community of believers. He relies upon the fundamental notions of purity and holiness within his society, notions that he owes to his Jewish heritage.<sup>10</sup> James describes the Torah as the "perfect law" (James 1:25). The law spells out the way the believing community acts in order to maintain access to God and to keep their wholeness. John Elliott notes, "To be holy, according to James, is to be whole – with respect to personal integrity, communal solidarity, and religious commitment."<sup>11</sup>

In expressing his understanding of perfection as wholeness, James reflects the heart of Jesus' teaching. The greatest commandment is the law of loving God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). In other words, Jesus challenges his followers to the love of God with their entire being. This embraces a wholeness in *thought* (heart, soul, and mind) and *actions* (strength). Matthew's Jesus stresses that one cannot be divided in loyalty to God: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). This corresponds to James's stress that one cannot seek friendship with God and with the world: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

### **JAMES FOR TODAY: PEOPLE OF FAITH-IN-ACTION**

The message of James continues to challenge us to live out our faith. The basic understanding of perfection in James relates to the idea of *wholeness or completeness*, "so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4, ESV). Wholeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith. In a world becoming more and more secular, the guiding light of faith must enlighten our path forward.

For James, an authentic integral life is not achieved on one's own. It can only be accomplished through God's grace. God alone is the one who empowers the individual to attain wholeness and completeness. Believers are "the first fruits of God's creatures" (James 1:18). If anything is lacking, God is the one who promises to provide (1:5).

The word "integrity" captures the meaning and intent of James's concept of perfection.<sup>12</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines integrity in this way: "1. The condition of having no part or element wanting; unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety. 2. Unimpaired or uncorrupted state; original perfect condition; soundness.... 3.a. Innocence, sinlessness.... b. Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue; uprightness, honesty, sincerity...."<sup>13</sup>

Integrity demands consistency between faith and actions. Jesus called for integrity in his disciples. He constantly challenged the lack of integrity in the religious leaders of his own tradition. His criticism of the religious authorities is well summed up in his use of the word “hypocrite” to define them: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs...” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Believers should be a sign to the world of the consistency between faith and action that defines their lives. James’s stress on the importance of actions is always to be seen as a unity with one’s faith. He calls us to be people of faith-expressed-in-action.

### **EMPATHY WITH THE PAIN OF OTHERS**

There are a number of concrete ways in which the message of James challenges us to be people of integrity. First, we should express integrity through *empathy with the pain of others*. Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels demonstrates that he wants people to be whole, healthy, and connected. This is evident from the numerous miracles where Jesus reaches out to the sick who come to him for healing. For example, the leper who comes to Jesus and begs, “‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’” (Mark 1:40-41).

We can appreciate better the pain of others when we too have experienced similar struggles. The epistle of James opens with a positive evaluation of the experience of trials and sufferings in an individual’s life or as part of a community, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (James 1:2). James does not embrace sufferings for themselves. Instead, he embraces them as a means of strengthening one’s faith, perseverance, and adherence to one’s beliefs.

Since we are all made in God’s likeness, we share a bond with each other as children of the one Father. Being part of a community, we embrace as our own the struggles and pain of the individual members of that community. This is the context for James’s warning against gossip and hateful speech: “No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those are made in the likeness of God” (3:8-9).

In his first encyclical, *God Is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI expressed the responsibility we have to share in the pain of others:

For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.... The Church is God’s family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of the pain and sufferings of others should awaken in us a response of solidarity. As followers of Jesus, we should strive to make

whole once again whatever dehumanizes another. James draws attention to aspects that dehumanized the workers of his day, such as withholding daily wages from day laborers (James 5.4). Such action deprived a family of what was essential for their survival. Today we live in one of the wealthiest nations on the planet. Yet much of what we consume relies on the exploitation of migrant workers or on sweat shops demanding hard long hours of work for meager pay. James's message is as relevant today as it ever was. Give attention to the exploitation and sufferings of those on the margins of society and do something to make society whole.

### **UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR THE POOR**

Jesus' message called for a reversal of attitudes toward the poor and those who are marginalized. We encounter his outreach to the poor and marginalized throughout all the pages of the Gospels. James follows the same path in his instructions to his communities. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Jesus challenged his disciples to help the cause of those against whom society discriminates. James continues this same challenge in his plea to ensure that faith and action go hand in hand.

I love this graphic parable that James offers so forcefully:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

*James 2:14-17*

Jesus' final parable of the judgment of the nations in the Gospel of Matthew expresses the same message:

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

*Matthew 25:37-40*

Undoubtedly faith brings with it a social responsibility. The message of James is an application of the message of Jesus to his own world. The message of James challenges us in our turn to take this message of Jesus to heart.

James stands in a line reaching back through Jesus to the prophets who challenged social injustices and opened the eyes of their people to the needs of the poor and marginalized within their society. If God champions the poor, so too should God's people. James is a voice for the voiceless, a champion of the poor. He speaks out strongly against any form of discrimination against them. On one thing James is certain: God hears the cries of the poor (James

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5:4) and ultimately James believes that the greedy rich will be overthrown (5:5-6).

Every believer today is challenged to take James's message to heart. James speaks to our world as much as he did to his first-century world and asks us to embrace an option for the poor as Jesus did. "That James takes up their cause as an apostle of Jesus Christ demonstrates his option for the poor," Pedrito Maynard-Reid writes. "Like James, we,

as modern representatives of Jesus Christ, are called to take that option and to take up the cause of the oppressed."<sup>15</sup>

James's message of concern for those who are discriminated against resonates very strongly with me. The image in James 2:2-4 of the rich man and poor man entering the synagogue together and how they were treated differently is a striking parable that challenges every situation analogously where discrimination occurs. I was born and grew up in South Africa during the Apartheid era. Discrimination against another human person (created in the likeness of God) simply on the basis of the color of their skin was an accepted way of life for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Every aspect of life was determined: where you could live, where you could go to school, whom you could marry, what employment you could seek—all this on the basis of the color of your skin! What is even more horrendous was that the vast majority of the people in South Africa confessed that they were Christian! Faith and action were totally divorced from each other. This same challenge that James identifies lies at the heart of our concerns for our present world where struggles for justice continue that center around overcoming discrimination in the areas of race, gender, and class.

### **EMBRACING AN AUTHENTIC WAY OF LIFE**

The heart of James's message calls for an authentic human existence that brings faith and action into perfect harmony. James takes seriously the equali-

ty of all, an equality that avoids every form of discrimination. Christians belong to a faith community that embraces the same ways of acting with one another, with Jesus (through faith in him), and with God (through friendship with God [James 4:4]).

I have drawn attention to the two dimensions of authentic Christian perfection: the individual and the community. We live in an individualistic society where we view everything from the individual's perspective. However, the biblical writers generally address the individual as a member of the community. It is a wonderful reminder as we read the Sacred Scriptures to see that God's message is addressed to us as members of a community. Ours is the task to rediscover our bonds within the family of the Christian community and to challenge the Christian community to remain true to the call to integrity by embracing those values that James stresses: values of equality, integrity, concern for the poor. James's ethic of perfection remains as valid today as it was for the first generation of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Contrary to the hope of our culture that sets such a store in the "dream of human perfectibility,"<sup>16</sup> where science and reason are saviors, the letter of James draws attention to the reality of human nature and of sin. We place our hope in the "wisdom that comes from above." Through the power of almighty God's grace we are able to put faith into action. Through God's grace the believer leads a life that strives for maturity, integrity, and perfection. It is imperative to realize that nothing can be accomplished alone: in union with the community and through God's grace one grows in a more perfect relationship with God and with one's community.

As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote,

Nothing worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1 Chris Hedges, *I Don't Believe In Atheists: The Dangerous Rise of the Secular Fundamentalist* (London: Continuum, 2008), 14.

2 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

3 Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, Sacra Pagina 14 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 50-51.

4 The adjective *teleios* appears four times in chapter one (twice in 1:4, and in 1:17 and 1:25) and again at 3:2. The verb *teleioō* "to make perfect or complete" appears at 2:22, while



the verb *teleō* “to fulfill, to accomplish” occurs at 2:8. This clearly shows it is an important concept for this letter.

5 See Patrick J. Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 22-32.

6 You can see this in the following passages: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless (*teleios*) in his generation” (Genesis 6:9); “Your lamb shall be without blemish (*teleios*), a year-old male” (Exodus 12:5); and “You must remain completely loyal (*teleios*) to the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 18:13).

7 Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 26.

8 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

9 Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 89.

10 The social-scientific study of Christian origins recently has increased our understanding and awareness to the role that cultic, moral, and social purity rules played in Second Temple Judaism and the world of early Christianity. See Mary T. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966); George W. Buchanan, “The Role of Purity in the Structure of the Essene Sect” *Revue de Qumran* 4 (1963), 397-406; John H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy*, Novum Testamentum Supplements XII (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1966); John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981); John H. Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective: Holiness-Wholeness and Patterns of Replication,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993), 71-81; Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1973); Jacob Neusner, “History and Purity in First-Century Judaism,” *History of Religions* 18 (1978), 1-17; and Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 149-183.

11 Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective,” 78.

12 See Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection*, 101.

13 *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, volume 1 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1088.

14 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2006), §25, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html).

15 Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 98.

16 Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, 184.

17 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 63.



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