



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Faith in Action: An Ethic of “Perfection”
(*The Letter of James*, pp. 21-29)

Suggested Article:

📖 Drawing James
(*The Letter of James*, pp. 48-53)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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

James challenges us to live faithfully, to “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 1:1-5

Reflection

James’s call for us to become perfect (*teleios*) can make us uneasy, Patrick Hartin admits. It might seem utopian (denying the reality of sin in our lives) or prideful (pretending that we can trust in ourselves and ignore God). Yet the epistle does not shy from the language of perfection when it describes the goal of discipleship (1:14, 17, 25, and 3:2; cf. 2:8 and 2:22).

To get a bead on James’s meaning, Hartin examines how *teleios* was used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Scripture that James and his readers used. Temple sacrifices were to be “without blemish” (Exodus 12:5); by analogy, other aspects of life could be unblemished: for example, Noah was “blameless in his generation” (Genesis 6:9). From an extensive study, Hartin concludes that *teleios* has three dimensions of meaning in the Septuagint: “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.... Third, such a wholehearted dedication to the Lord is expressed through obedience to God’s will” expressed in the Torah.

As Hartin traces this understanding of perfection as wholeness through the epistle, we begin to see how helpful, even winsome, is James’s depiction of discipleship in community.

- ▶ We are called to be *people of faith-expressed-in-action*. The sort of perfection as wholeness that James commends requires integrity between our beliefs and actions (2:14-18). This is not a replacement of faithfulness with social action. Hartin writes, “In a world becoming more and more secular, the guiding light of faith must enlighten our path forward. James’s stress on the importance of actions is always to be seen as a unity with one’s faith.”
- ▶ We should express this integrity in community through *empathy with the pain of others*. Suffering is not good in itself, but it can be a means of strengthening our faith and perseverance (1:2-4). As members of the God’s family, we should “embrace as our own the struggles and pain of the individual members of that community,” Hartin notes. This is the context for James’s specific warnings against gossip and hateful speech (3:8-9) and dehumanizing day laborers (5:4).
- ▶ We should show *unconditional love for the poor and marginalized*. Shocked by the hypocrisy evidenced by the differing treatment of rich and poor in the community, James asks, “Do you with your



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acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" (2:2-4). James's graphic parable of showing one's faith through care for the poor (2:14-17) echoes Jesus' parable of the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:37-40). Hartin concludes, "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 (5:4) and ultimately James believes that the greedy rich will be overthrown (5:5-6)."

"We live in an individualistic society where we view everything from the individual's perspective," Hartin observes. But, he reminds us, James's call to perfection as wholeness "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 as well to remain true to the call to integrity by embracing those values that James stresses: values of equality, integrity, concern for the poor."

Study Questions

1. Patrick Hartin suggests that James's use of "perfect" (*teleios*) is rooted in the Septuagint. How does this Jewish heritage shape the meaning of this key concept in the letter?
2. Hartin identifies three practical implications of James's view of perfection—integrity in faith and actions, empathy with others' suffering, and unconditional love for the poor. How does each one of these exemplify wholeness?
3. How, according to Hartin, does the letter of James's opening address (1:1) introduce the theme of a whole or complete community of believers? Why is it important that James's call to perfection is addressed to us not as individuals, but as members of a community?
4. Artist Paul Soupiset observes, "James has a lot to say to any Jesus-follower interested in issues of missional living, justice, restoration, and peacemaking. His take on the gospel seems to dovetail well with a roll-up-your-sleeves Kingdom-minded theology." How does Soupiset express this understanding of James in *Ex Libris – James the Less*?
5. While Soupiset was sketching the three images of James for this issue, he reflected on the epistle's teaching about "the gentleness of wisdom" (James 3:13-18). What themes from this passage do you find in Soupiset's "liturgical sketches"?

Departing Hymn: "Try Us, O God" (vv. 1 and 4)

Try us, O God, and search the ground
of every contrite heart;
whate'er of sin in us is found,
O bid it all depart.

Help us to build each other up,
each other's walk improve;
increase our faith, confirm our hope,
and perfect us in love.

Charles Wesley (1742), alt.

Tune: DUNDEE

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

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the meaning of “perfect” (*teleios*) in the letter of James.
2. To trace through the letter of James particular implications of perfection as wholeness.
3. To reflect on the depiction of James in the artwork of Paul Soupiset.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Try Us, O God” locate the familiar tune DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Patrick Hartin has more than a scholarly interest in the concern for hypocrisy that permeates the letter of James. For instance, “James’s message of concern for those who are discriminated against resonates very strongly with me,” he writes. “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” (*The Letter of James*, 26).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to lead you to more maturity in your discipleship as you study the letter of James.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 1:1-5 from a modern translation.

Reflection

One way to uncover the unity of a biblical text is to track an important theme through its teachings. In this study we follow Patrick Hartin in tracing how the letter of James uses forms of *teleios*, which is usually translated “perfect” or “mature.” James 1:4 announces the theme that believers should become mature.

Hartin suggests the basic meaning of *teleios* in James is having integrity, wholeness, and total dedication. This allows Hartin to draw together James’s famous teaching on faith and works with its more particular exhortations about mutual care, fraternal correction, and concern for the poor. It also suggests a significant way that James draws upon the Jewish heritage, for the word *teleios* is used in the Septuagint to describe “unblemished” sacrifices and, by extension, “blameless” character. Use this study to help members to see the letter of James as a whole and to appreciate the rich Jewish roots of the Christian faith-expressed-in-action that it teaches.

Study Questions

1. Patrick Hartin writes, “The Septuagint used the Greek adjective *teleios* (as well as the adjective *amōmos*) to translate the Hebrew word *tamim*. An examination of these words points to an origin within the Hebrew cult, especially that of the sacrificial Temple worship. Cultic laws required all offerings to be free of any defect, ‘unblemished’ (*teleios*).” The word is used this way in Exodus 12:5 and thirty-seven times in Leviticus, Numbers, and Ezekiel to describe appropriate offerings. This idea of dedicating oneself and the best of one’s possessions to God in grateful appreciation of God’s grace stands behind James’s description of discipleship. “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.”
2. Ask three small groups to reflect on one of the implications and report back to the whole group. The first implication—of integrity in faith and action—suggests wholeness and lack of hypocrisy within each individual believer. James seeks integrity of faith among believers (note the emphasis on correction in James 5:16, 19-20). The second and third implications extend this wholeness to relationships among the believers, and toward other people like the day laborers they employ (James 5:4). Believers who integrate their beliefs in God’s generosity into their own actions will mutually support, encourage, and correct one another, and will act with justice and compassion toward all people.
3. Hartin notes that in James 1:1 the word “Dispersion” refers to the many Jews who were forced, originally by warfare and famine, to live outside of Palestine. “The twelve tribes” refers to all the people of Israel descended from the twelve sons of Jacob (Exodus 24:4; 28:21; and 39:14), who had not been united in a twelve-tribe kingdom since the time of King David. Ezekiel 37:21-22 states God’s promise to reunite the people. Thus, James’s opening address “expresses hope in the fulfillment of this twelve-tribe kingdom” through the Church.

The idea that believers will encourage, financially support, and correct one another is central to James’s ethical instruction. As members of a whole or complete community, they will be emblems of God’s generosity to one another and of God’s blessing to the world.

4. In *Ex Libris – James the Less*, Paul Soupiset depicts James holding a Bible which contains the letter he has written. “Words and images interact throughout Soupiset’s work,” Heidi Hornik notes. “Sometimes a word or phrase from Scripture will inspire part of a drawing and manifest itself like an illuminator’s marginalia; other times the emerging image will speak a word to the artist which gets incorporated into the drawing. For instance, while drawing the Bible in *Ex Libris – James the Less*, the phrase ‘ex libris’ (Latin for ‘out of the books’) came to Soupiset’s mind, and he added ‘in vicus’ (‘into the village’) to the phrase to approximate a Jamesian admonition to ‘get out of the books and into the neighborhood.’” These two Latin phrases also appear in Soupiset’s final sketch, *James the Less*.
5. Soupiset says the process of liturgical sketching “allows me to approach the text, the story, with an open hand, with contingency, inviting the Spirit to do what the Spirit will, or won’t. It’s not about the mastery of the texts, but about inspiration, illumination, and contemplating the ancient paths.” He was inspired by the phrase “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:18) to add the seeds and fruit in the upper right corner of *The Seed – James the Less*. These emblems of the “good fruits” produced by “the wisdom from above” reappear in the lower left corner of *James the Less*, but now they stand in contrast to an emblem of judgment—scales of justice superimposed on dead branches.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.