



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 James's Theological Grammar
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 38-47)

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

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

James's Theological Grammar

A theological grammar of James, guided by the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith, can help us uncover the letter's rich Trinitarian theology. It enables a faithful community to mine this sacred text for a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs "every good work."

Prayer

Draw near to God,
and God will draw near to you.

**Humble yourselves before the Lord,
and God will exalt you.**

O Lord, help us through our study of your Word
to draw closer to you.

**Help us to be humble
and to seek your way. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: James 2:14-26

Reflection

To gauge the significance of James, we need to ask the right questions. Often we focus on things the letter is *not*: it's not a story about Jesus (like the Gospels), not a soaring theological statement (like Hebrews and some Pauline letters), and not very long. Unsurprisingly, such reflections on "what James is *not*" only make the letter look less impressive in the biblical scheme.

Robert Wall proposes another way of looking at the letter — as a gateway to an important collection in the Bible. He observes, "James stands at the head of the Catholic Epistles, which are the seven New Testament letters addressed to the early Christian churches at large. The theology of James can be an interpretive guide to the other six letters in this collection — 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John (and by extension 2 and 3 John), and Jude."

Wall organizes the theological ideas throughout the letter of James according to five themes drawn from Tertullian's version of the apostolic Rule of Faith. (See Wall's article for Tertullian's wording of these themes.) To illustrate the usefulness of this "theological grammar," we'll briefly trace how each theme illuminates the famous passage on faith and works (James 2:14-26).

- ▶ *The Creator God*. James says the one and only true God (2:19), who made all things (cf. 1:17-18), has created every person in God's own likeness (3:9). Even the demons know such things and tremble; however, they do not love God. "To love God is to do God's will; for life is granted to those who do God's will (4:15)," Wall writes.
- ▶ *Christ Jesus*. James's account of Christ is "underdeveloped," Wall admits. "Instead of more explicit formulations of Christ's coming into the world, James rather says that God sends forth 'the word of truth' into the world (1:17-18) to fulfill the promise of blessing (1:12) and to save God's people (1:21) from the result of their deception and sin (1:13-16), which is death (5:19-20)." Believers are to welcome this "implanted" word (1:21) and promptly do what it requires, as faithful individuals in the tradition as different as Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25) did. Wall writes, "In



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

particular, Jesus received divine approval as the 'glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (2:1) because of his obedience to the 'royal law' (2:8): Jesus loved his poor neighbors, who are the chosen of God (2:5), and resisted their discrimination by the rich (2:1-4)."

- ▶ *Community of the Spirit*. Inevitably a congregation's faithfulness will be tested by forces of evil both within individual members and in the surrounding world. As members struggle with their envy and unchecked desires for pleasure (4:1-10), they may be deceived into thinking "God approves of religious orthodoxy (2:19; cf. 2:8) that is merely confessed but never embodied (1:26; 2:14-17). But the requirements of God's covenant partner are more morally demanding and active than this (2:21-26)." Dangerous forces lurk outside the congregation: "Not only are there rich and powerful outsiders who undermine the community's faith (2:6-7) in order to exploit poor members for their own advantage (2:2-4; 5:1-6), the congregation is surrounded by a 'world' which is God's enemy (4:4)." Faithful communities respond with Christian formation guided by "wise and understanding" teachers (3:13; cf. 5:14).
- ▶ *Christian Life*. Wall notes that, for James, "covenanting with God to receive God's promised blessing is conditioned upon following a pattern of new life exemplified by Jesus.... [Believers] must obey this 'word of truth' —heavenly wisdom—and practice 'pure and undefiled' behavior as the public mark of friendship with God." Instead of a code of right conduct, James commends practices a 'pure and undefiled' congregation performs as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality.
- ▶ *Consummation*. "James centers the community's hope on the event that concludes the biblical story: the coming triumph of the Lord at the end of this age (5:7-9). At this climatic and cosmic 'any-moment,' the eschatological community will be confirmed and vindicated, even as their enemies are judged and destroyed (5:4-6); for God will judge the foolish and bless the wise (1:12; 2:12-13; 4:11-12; 5:5-11)."

Study Questions

1. What does Robert Wall mean by a "theological grammar" for a specific biblical book? Why does he think it must be developed in concert with the Church's Rule of Faith?
2. Which of the five theological themes — the Creator God, Jesus Christ, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation — seem to be most salient in the letter of James? Which are most undeveloped? How do you explain this?
3. Discuss James's account of practices a "pure and undefiled" congregation will perform as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality? Why does Wall call these "practices" rather than a "code of right conduct that demands rigorous compliance"?

Departing Hymn: "O Lord, May All We Say and Do"

James's Theological Grammar

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 5:1-20
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Explore the four congregational practices
Question 1	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Question 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the concept of a theological grammar and its relation to the Church's Rule of Faith.
2. To trace five theological themes—the Creator God, Jesus Christ, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation—through the letter of James.
3. To reflect on the congregational practices which are central to James's ethical instruction.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O Lord, May All We Say and Do" locate the familiar tune TALLIS CANON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/). The lyrics to this hymn are printed on p. 60 of *The Letter of James*.

Begin with a Comment

On a first reading, the letter of James may seem to wander about in a disorganized way. It helps to see its teachings in light of the grand narrative that the Church has found in Scripture. Robert Wall orders the epistle's major teachings around five themes—the Creator God, Christ Jesus, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation—to help us uncover its rich Trinitarian theology. He calls the result a *theological grammar*—"a body of interpenetrating theological agreements that help explain what is written...[and] make certain a faithful community mines the sacred text in search of a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs 'every good work.'"

"While the theological grammar of any biblical composition is constructed from the raw materials the text itself provides, its detection is guided by analogy to the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith," Wall notes. "Scripture's simultaneity, which is otherwise impossible to detect amidst the sheer diversity of its witnesses, is only evinced when the interpretation of all its parts is carefully monitored by this Rule" (*The Letter of James*, 36).

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 2:14-26 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Tertullian introduced the phrase "rule of faith" to describe a list of basic Christian beliefs, and his term caught on among early theologians. "Apostolic" means that the beliefs derive from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Robert Wall employs Tertullian's version of the apostolic Rule of Faith to construct a theological grammar of the letter of James. Space does not allow quoting Tertullian's words in the study guide. As you study each theological theme, ask a group member to read from Wall's article the appropriate sentences from Tertullian's writings.

If your group would like to extend their study of the central theological themes in James, you might reserve the discussion of the four congregational practices – a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality – for a second session.

Study Questions

1. Try this exercise to help members understand a “rule of faith.” What would they say if someone asked them how Christians read and interpret a certain biblical book? They might say: “Christians can learn from how contemporary scholars, modern Jews and Muslims, and other contemporary people read the book, but we bring a distinctive perspective to our reading. We believe it is the word of the God, who is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is present with us through the Holy Spirit. We take the book’s instruction, when rightly understood, as a guide for our discipleship in the Church, where we are growing in love for God in preparation for the glorious fulfillment of God’s kingdom.” Those last two sentences are a brief rule of faith, a statement of fundamental beliefs that govern how Christians read Scripture.

A “theological grammar” employs the rule of faith to organize and illumine the rich themes of a biblical book. So, Robert Wall gathers what James says about God, about the life and teachings of Jesus, about the Spirit in the Church, etc. A scholar might gather and organize insights in other interesting ways – e.g., around themes that appeal to the rich, the poor, or another group, that concern healing or miracles, that reflect first-century patronage systems or views of friendship, etc. – but these would not be distinctively Christian ways of reading. Such strategies would not, in themselves and unaided by the rule of faith, show believers how to integrate the book’s teachings into their common life of discipleship.

2. Form five small groups to study and briefly summarize James’s teachings on each theme. Wall notes that James expands on the generous nature of God as Creator, has much to say about the spiritual development of their community and the nature of their practices (which is the topic of the next question), and concludes with a focus on the coming eschatological judgment. However, according to Wall, the second theme of Jesus Christ is “famously underdeveloped.”

James’s “narrative of God’s redemptive agent differs from the Pauline witness and is largely responsible for the disquiet that James evokes among its Protestant interpreters.” James depicts Jesus as the divine wisdom that through his life and teachings shows us how to obey God’s will. Paul emphasizes how Jesus, especially through his death, proclaims God’s kingdom in a way that calls forth obedient faith in the trustworthiness of that proclamation. Encourage members to discuss how these differences might be explained by James and Paul’s different audiences (Jewish and Gentile) and missions (relating the gospel to the Jewish heritage and introducing the gospel to those not familiar with that heritage).

3. Create four small groups to explore and briefly summarize how each practice – a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality – is developed in the letter of James. Wall refers to these as “congregational purity practices” because “the most important element of the moral universe shaped by James” is that “the community must resist the moral pollutants of the surrounding ‘world’ (or anti-God) order and care for the needy neighbor in accordance with God’s ‘perfect law of liberty’ (1:27; cf. 2:1-13).” Admittedly “the interior life of the individual believer is surely an important feature of this same moral universe,” but it is not the focus of James’s attention. In other words, James highlights what the community does to remain faithful and distinctive from the morally distorted patterns of the surrounding culture.

Departing Hymn

“O Lord, May All We Say and Do” is on p. 61 of *The Letter of James*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.