

## The parable of the sower in the Epistle of James

The original setting for the Epistle of James is most likely the second stage of the new ecclesia of Christ when believers were either Jews or proselytes, and when they still met in synagogues (James 2:2). Not long after Pentecost large numbers of these disciples were “scattered abroad” (Acts 8:1, 11:19) because of the persecution following the murder of Stephen, and this added to the numbers of believers dispersed across the diaspora who had returned to their homes after their baptism in Jerusalem (Acts 2:9-11). So the epistle begins by addressing these earliest Christians as “the twelve tribes scattered abroad”.

The first stage of ecclesial life was the ideal (“the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul” Acts 4:32), but as numbers increased challenges to the harmony of the ecclesia also increased. The first reported in Acts was the deception attempted by Ananias and Sapphira who pretended that the money they contributed to the poor fund was the full income from the sale of their property. A different sort of problem emerged in the distribution of that welfare fund to meet the needs of the widows. Complaints were made by Greek speaking widows that the Hebrew speaking widows were getting preferential treatment. Was this true or was it just a perception? We are not told. And although it seems probable that prejudice had a part there is also an indication that the way the problem emerged revealed another challenging aspect of human nature. Acts 6:1 says there arose “a murmuring”. This word also describes the complaints of Israel in the wilderness (1Cor 10:10), behaviour we are to avoid in ecclesial life (Phil 2:14, 1 Peter 4:9). It is these sort of personal and domestic issues - the deceitfulness of riches, true religion versus self-deception, the wrong use of the tongue, the need to “visit” the fatherless and widows, and avoiding prejudice and bias in our dealings with one another - are the very things that James addresses in chapters 1-2.

In exhorting the young ecclesia of Christ, the Spirit-inspired apostle takes hold of the teaching of the Master, and applies that teaching to everyday discipleship. Yet as we try to follow the flow of thought in the epistle we come up against a well known difficulty - what is the logic that leads one thought to follow another? Here is a proposal. James 1 follows the parable of the sower. The parable is so well known we will not need to relate it. There are four types of soil but only the last three are relevant for disciples. The first, the seed that landed on the path, was simply trodden under foot and did not germinate. This is the Gospel falling on unresponsive hearts. The second,

third and fourth scenarios describe the reception of the Gospel by believers. Only the last is fruitful.

### The need for patience: James 1:2-8

James begins the epistle with the need for **patience** in adversity.

*“My brethren, **count it all joy** when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh **patience**” (vv2-3).*

In the account of the parable of the sower in Luke 8 the seed that fell on good ground is the seed that "bring forth fruit with **patience**" (Luke 8:15). When James says "count it all **joy**", the word for "joy" is also the word used in the same parable to describe the enthusiastic response of the seed that falls on rocky ground (Luke 8:13). The joy that the Lord is looking for is the joy that can be sustained by patience under trial and not just initial exuberance.

The section that covers this goes from verse 2-8. After the summary statement in verses 2-3 there follows a set of six statements that take us step by step through the argument - we need God's wisdom to survive. In this pattern of thought the keyword or concept in the second part of each statement is taken up in the first part of the next -

a. v 2 *“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh **patience**.*

b. v4 *But let **patience** have her **perfect** work,*

c. *that ye may be **perfect** and entire, **wanting** nothing.*

d. *5 If any of you **lack** wisdom, **let him ask** of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

e. *6 But **let him ask** in faith, nothing **wavering**.*

f. *For he that **wavereth** is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. 7 For let not **that man** think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.*

g. *8 A double minded **man** is unstable in all his ways.*

The flow of thought represented by the key words is like a staircase

a. *Patience*

b. *patience - perfect*

c. *perfect - wanting*

- d. wanting - ask
- e. ask - not wavering
- f. wavering - that man
- g. Double minded man

### Shallow roots when the sun is hot: James 1:9-12

After telling us about the need for wisdom to develop patience under trial James moves on to tell us about the transience of riches. We can detect a simple chiasmic structure here which centres on the heat of the sun.

a. 9 Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted:  
10 But the **rich**, in that he is made low:

b. because as **the flower of the grass** he shall pass away.

c. 11 For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat,

b'. but it withereth the **grass, and the flower** thereof falleth,  
and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth:

a'. so also shall the **rich** man fade away in his ways.

Immediately our thoughts are again directed to the same parable of the sower (Matt 13:6). The sun's heat represents "tribulation or persecution" (Matt 13:21) and links to James 1:2. So we are still on the same track. The reference in verse 8 to the double minded man who is unstable in all his ways connects to the rich man in verses 10-11. The Greek of "double minded" is literally "two-souled". It suggests there is a competition going on within the heart of the disciple between two different lives. "Double minded" appears only one other time, in James 4:8 pointing to the compromised position of a disciple tangled up in the friendship of the world. Jesus indicates this type of problem when he says that we cannot serve God and mammon (Matt 6:24). Here is an explanation for the shallow roots. The soil has its capacity greatly reduced by the presence deep down of other cherished things, rocks that cannot be moved. There is therefore only space for a shallow love for the Word of God.

Set against the early circumstances of the ecclesia we can sense the sorts of challenges to which James is alluding. There were many poor, including widows and orphans, possible because they had been excluded from the Temple/Synagogue welfare system. Would those with property release the equity and support the needy. And when it came to persecution, to flee might be to lose everything they had to leave behind. Would they remain faithful to

the Lord or would they renounce their allegiance to retain their riches?  
Double-minded or single-minded?

Immediately after these words of warning against trusting in riches we have the contrast of verse 12 - "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life ..." it is a corrective to the double minded rich man. Those who endure receive the crown that does not fade away (1 Pet 5:4) in contrast to the riches which do (v11). Verse 12 repeats the reference to temptation/trial that James began in verse 2, telling us that we are still on track. But this time James uses another word related to patience which is endurance. The shallow rooted do not endure when the sun is hot, but those whose roots grow deep into "honest and good hearts" draw water from the Word and survive and flourish.

### Lusts that choke the Word: James 1:13-15.

The next section, James 1:13-15, might again seem unrelated to the previous verses. The same word for "tempt" is used in verse 2, but in verse 2 it is referring to circumstances and events under God's control that test our faith. In verses 13-14 it is referring to the inner temptation to sin. The flow of thought is this - God puts us in circumstances that try our faith. In these situations we need wisdom to know what we should do, and we should ask for it in faith. But riches blunt our desire for the wisdom of God so that when the heat comes our roots are too shallow and our commitment fails. Our attachment to our riches is something that is generated from within us. Trials may expose this weakness but the problem is ours. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man".

The process that lead to sin is as follows

- a. *14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own **lust**, and enticed.*
- b. *15 Then when **lust** hath conceived, it bringeth forth **sin**:*
- c. *and **sin**, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.*

This sequence of thought also has the step by step structure to elucidate the path from temptation to sin. The heart of the matter is "lust". And this is the word that Mark 4 uses to describe "they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the **lusts** of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful" (Mark 4:18-19). This cluster of weeds - cares, riches and lusts, link

the rich man with shallow roots to the choking presence of those things that compete for our love.

The good seed: James 1:17-21.

The next section 1:17-21 is recognisable as such because it begins and ends with reference to the Word of God that is likened to the germinating seed. The reference in verse 18 to “begat” links by contrast to the way sin “brings forth” death in verse 15. The relevance of the parable of the sower is clear. The Greek word translated “engrafted” speaking of the Word of God in verse 21 is a composite of the word “spring up”, used only three times in the NT but twice in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:6 and 8:8). The whole sequence of thought follows that of the parable, so having addressed the shallow soil and the choking brambles, we now come to the fourth type of soil suited to producing fruit.

*a. 16 Do not err, my beloved brethren.*

*b. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

*c. 18 Of his own will begat he us with **the word of truth**, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

*a'. 19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren,*

*b'. let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:  
20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.*

*c'. 21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness **the engrafted word**, which is able to save your souls.*

The sequence of thought is repeated by a regular parallelism with both sets beginning with the appeal to the “beloved brethren”. First there is the insistence that everything given by God is good. There are no shadowy sides to God’s character. The context of “giving” goes back to the need to ask God for wisdom. That Spirit gift (1Cor 12:8) would be “the word of truth” and would manifest itself by the quality of peaceableness (James 3:1-18) rather than contentious argument (James 3:16). Can we see here an indication of the underlying ecclesial problem; some who wanted to be teachers (3:1) were claiming God given wisdom, but were actually causing strife (3:18). What needed to be done was “to put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness” (1:21 ESV) and instead receive the seed that will bring forth spiritual fruit. The severe of the language used in the epistle matches the

severity of the Master's description of the things that come out of the heart of man (Matthew 15:19).

### Bringing forth fruit: James 1:22-27.

The final section of the chapter develops the practical aspects of that fruit of the Spirit that is germinated by the Word of truth in good and honest hearts.

a. 22 But be ye **doers** of the word, and not hearers only, **deceiving your own selves.**

b. 23 For if any be **a hearer of the word, and not a doer**, he is like unto a man **beholding** his natural face in a glass: 24 For he **beholdeth** himself, and goeth his way, and straightway **forgetteth** what manner of man he was.

b'. 25 But whoso **looketh into** the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, **he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work**, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

a'. 26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but **deceiveth his own heart**, this man's religion is vain. 27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To **visit** the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to **keep** himself unspotted from the world.

The emphasis on being doers of the Word comes directly from the Sermon on the Mount where the Lord likens the wise man to the one who builds his house on a rock (Matt 7:24-27), a house that will withstand the battering of the storm. This is a contrast to the double minded man of verse 8 who is without stability. Broadly the pattern of thought begins and ends with the danger of self deception. Implementing the Word is what God wants and this will be manifest in the practical expression of the way we use our tongues, visiting the orphans and widows, and keeping our hearts free of the cares and lusts of this world.

## Appendix

### The Luke record and James 1

The specific references to the parable of the sower link more frequently with the language of the parable in the Luke 8 record, as the opening use of **joy** and **patience** indicate. In Luke 8 following the parable we have the encounter with Jesus' family when the Lord says "My mother and my brethren are these which **hear the word of God, and do it**" (v21). Then we get the storm on the lake and the waves pounding the ship as mentioned above. Interestingly the word for the "raging" of the sea in Luke 8:24 is found elsewhere only in James 1:6. Is this simply coincidence? If Luke was writing

well after James it seems more likely that Luke was writing down with Spirit-given accuracy what the apostles had recounted. The flow of thought is so similar and links the parable of the sower, spoken from a ship (Mark 4:1) with the stormy sea and the wavering disciples maybe even in the same boat.

Then, the twelve had a first hand experience of what “trials” were, and the need for faith to develop patience and trust in God. Their pleas to Jesus were heard but their faith was lacking. Our minds immediately move forward to Simon Peter when he stepped outside the ship to walk on the water. Are we intended to see him at that time as the example of the “wavering man” ? But look at him now in the early chapter of Acts, full of faith, on trial but patiently waiting, his ecclesia praying without ceasing (Acts 12:3-11).

Interestingly, the word for “wavering’ or doubting in James 1:6 is the same word used by the angel to Peter in Acts 10:20 - yes, go to Cornelius “nothing doubting’. The word is repeated in Acts 11:12 and 15:9 where it is in the context of discrimination against Gentiles receiving the Gospel. Peter was on the house top overlooking the Mediterranean Sea praying. What thoughts was he contemplating? Where next should the Gospel go? To the Gentiles? Surely not? Was Peter praying for the wisdom to know? The answer came while he was at prayer. Go to Cornelius and baptise him. Be a stable faithful rock unmoved by the storm of controversy that will arise. And in this way, the epistle is perhaps preparing the ecclesias for the forthcoming challenge of accepting Gentiles without discrimination.