

# 9

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## Letter of James (3) *Confession of Sins and Intercession (I)*

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The  
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In the two preceding conferences I have tried to explain to you some theological and moral principles of the letter of James. In this conference, on the other hand, I would like to present an aspect of the pastoral teaching of James in reference to the pericope of Jas 5,13-20, which in my presentation of the contents is indicated as the 15th and the last section of the letter.

The text reads: "Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters/elders of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. Elijah was a human being like us; yet he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the earth produced its fruit. My brothers, if anyone among you should stray from the truth and someone brings him back, he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." I shall develop this presentation under four sections, viz., (i) general content of the unit, Jas 5,13-20; (ii) meaning of the vocabulary of Jas 5,16; (iii) analysis of the main themes; (iv) message of Jas 5,16.

### *I. General Content of the Unit*

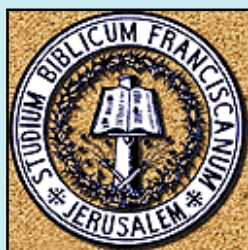
As we can easily observe, this unit (Jas 5,13-20) contains various exhortations formulated in a similar pattern. They could very well be classified as three constitutive elements of a practical exhortation and its elaboration with an example. The constitutive elements of his exhortative pattern include (i) a life situation, (ii) proposed action, (iii) and the expected result. James begins by enunciating a life situation, i.e., sadness, joy, sickness, sins, going astray, and conversion. Then he indicates the appropriate action, viz., prayer, singing psalms, calling the elders, confession of sins, prayer for one another, and fraternal correction. At the end he envisages a beneficial result, i.e., salvation, relief from sickness, the remission of sins, healing, salvation of the soul, and covering of sins.

The elaboration with an illustration of the figure of Elijah constitutes vv. 16-18. In fact, in v. 16a the author does not enunciate a new case rather recollects the previous ones as direct instructions. In v. 16b James makes a declaration on the power of the prayer of a just man, after having presented in the foregoing verses various instructions on individual prayer (v. 13), on the elders' prayer of intercession for the sick (vv. 14-15) and on the mutual prayer of the community (v. 16b). The declaration of the power of prayer is substantiated by an example from the life of Elijah (vv. 17-18). After this elaboration the epistle speaks again of a particular case of the one who brings back a sinner from the error (19-20).

Within this general content of the unit, v. 16 attains prominence because of its constitution by the three important themes, viz., the confession of sins, mutual prayer and the consequential healing. Hence let us concentrate on v. 16 and its themes.

### *II. The Vocabulary*

We shall begin by analysing the vocabulary of this verse in order to understand its real meaning. So reads Jas 5,16: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you



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may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful.” The analysis of its vocabulary is done at two steps, viz., (i) Therefore, confess your sins to one another; (ii) and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

## A. “Therefore confess your sins to one another”

### 1. “CONFESS YOUR SINS”

#### i) Old Testament and the Other Jewish Literature

In the Old Testament the expression appears only once in the Septuagint version of Dan 9,20: “And while I was still speaking, praying, and confessing (*exomologoumenos*) my sins and those of my people (*tas hamartias mou kai hamartias tou laou mou*) Israel and presenting my supplications to the Lord my God... ” To express the confession of sins the Septuagint prefers the verb *exagoreuin* which means to make known, recognize, narrate, announce, say, reveal (cf. Lev 5,5; 16,21; 26,40: Num 5,7; Neh 1,16; 9,2; 1 Ps 31(32),5). Once in Sir 4,26 we find *homologein*: “Do not blush in confessing your sins (*homologesai eph’hamartias sou*).” This phrase is also found in Joseph Flavius and in other authors of ancient Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

#### ii) New Testament and Early Christian Literature

The formula “confess your sins” (*exomologeisthe tas hamartias*) is well-known in the New Testament language. In Mt 3,6 and Mk 1,5 the expression indicates the external manifestation of the sins by those who went to be baptized by John the Baptizer: “... and confessing their sins (*exomologoumenoi tas hamartias auton*), they were baptized by him in the river Jordan.” It is a confession which was accompanied by the baptism of conversion.

In Acts 19,18 the confession concerns magic practices by the new converts of Ephesus: “Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing (*exomologoumenoi*) and divulging their magic practices.” Substantially identical is the formula that we find in 1Jn 1,9 where we read: “If we confess our sins (*exomologomen*), he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The expression “to confess sins (*exomologeisthai tas hamartias*)” or “the confession of sins (*exomologesis ton hamartion*)” is very common in the first Christian writers.<sup>3</sup> There it indicates: the confession of sins in general, the confession of sins in the liturgical assembly, the auricular confession, and monastic confession.<sup>4</sup>

What is the meaning this phrase in our text of James? It is really difficult to determine the precise meaning of the terms. For, the analysis of the vocabulary does not lead us to an univocal interpretation. A second reason is that the actual practice of the confession by the first Christians is not sufficiently known.<sup>5</sup> However, the most accepted opinion is that the text refers to a confession made in a community encounter. For instance from the Didache we learn that it was done before the eucharistic celebration and before prayer.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. “TO ONE ANOTHER”

James exhorts the readers to confess the sins “to one another (*allelois*),” as he later invites to pray “for one another (*hyper allelon*).” Here he does not speak any more of the prayer of intercession by the presbyters for those who are sick (v. 14), but he rather refers it to all the members of the community.

#### i) Community relationship as the fountain

The pronoun “one another” evokes the theme of the community and the concept that James has about the social and fraternal relationship. The author of this letter reveals himself as a teacher extremely concerned with the relationships among the members of the community.<sup>7</sup>

#### ii) A theological vision of community

This sensibility has at its base a theological vision which has already been announced in the address of the letter destined “to the twelve tribes dispersed in the world” (1,1). A second designation of the community which is significant in this respect is the term “Church (*ekklesia*)” used in 5,14.

#### iii) Orderly community

Besides, according to James the community is not an anonymous togetherness. It includes “masters”, among whom he placed himself (3,1), presbyters (5,14) and brothers of various social and moral conditions (remember that the term *adelphos* appears 19 times in the letter).

#### iv) Practical Exhortations

As framed by the two theological designations, viz., “the twelve tribes dispersed in the world” and “Church”, we find a series of exhortations which, on the one hand, recommends attitudes that promote the communitarian relationship, and on the other hand, reprimands the mode of thinking

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and acting that destroys that relationship. These attitudes render the faith useless, because it lacks the works of charity or it is mixed with favouritism.

The communitarian solidarity that James recommends is global, because it embraces the whole human life, from its material needs (assisting the widows and orphans: 1,27; not humiliating the poor: 2,2-4.6; giving to the needy what is necessary for the body: 2,15-16; praying for the cure of the sick brothers: 5,14-15) to the spiritual needs (not speaking ill of one another: 4,11; not grumbling against one another: 5,9; interceding reciprocally for the forgiveness of sins and for salvation on the example of Elijah: 5,16-18; working for bringing back the brothers who wander away from the truth: 5,19-20).<sup>8</sup>

Thus the phrase “to one another” underscores the mutual relationship within a community, which is visualized with theological motives and is being nurtured by the practical exhortations of James.

### 3. “THE SINS”

#### i) Source of sin and its dynamics

On the theme of sin the letter offers elements of great interest both on the practical and the theoretical levels.<sup>9</sup> Following the line of ancient Jewish thought, James identifies the root of human sin in concupiscence (*epithymia*). He also describes the mortal process of sin through the images of conception and birth (1,15: “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death”).<sup>10</sup>

#### ii) Diverse sinful actions

James describes several sinful actions or situations of sin indicated with the customary vocabulary: to sin, sin, sinner (*hamartanein, hamartia, hamartolos*). He further uses different vocabulary to express the sinful actions such as showing partiality (2,9), failing to act by those who know what is right to do (4,17), and of the indecision in prayer (1,6) and in life (4,8).

#### iii) Human fragility and responsibility

The acute conscience of sin makes him say: “...we all make many mistakes” (3,2). This conscience does not hinder James from recommending to the sinner’s purification (4,8), prayer, confession, and fraternal correction assuring pardon and the “covering” of “a multitude of sins” (5,14-16.19-20).

#### iv) Personal sins

The sins that James exhorts his readers to confess are personal sins. This is evident from the definite article accompanying the plural substantive (*tas hamartias*). Hence it is rendered in translations as “your sins”, with good reason, according to me.

Thus the demand to confess sins comes from a mature theory of sin which spreads through the letter of James. Tendency to sin is rooted in the human nature as concupiscence which has a dynamics that generates into sin and death. At the same time the human responsibility calls for curative actions, one of its concrete forms advised by James is its confession to each other.

## B. “And pray for one another in order to be cured”

### 1. “PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER”

The vocabulary of prayer in James appears rich and varied. The verbs *aiteo, euchomai, proseuchomai* and substantives *deesis, euche, proseuche* are used with a meaning substantially analogous. Regarding the theme of prayer we can say that almost all its aspects are touched upon, such as the content of prayer, its modality and effects (1,5-6; 4,2-3; 5,13-18).

James deals with both the general prayer of supplication (1,5-6; 4,2-3; 5,13) and the prayer of intercession (5,14-18). He recommends prayer to obtain wisdom (1,5-6). One should pray in situations of sadness as well as of joy (5,13), in the emergency of sickness (5,14-15) and in normal life (5,6). Based on the example of Elijah, a righteous man and an intercessor (5,16b-18), James exalts the supernatural effects of prayer, that can be attained from God, whom he defines as Father (1,27), the generous giver (1,5) of “every good endowment and every perfect gift” (1,17). Thus the exhortation to mutual intercession is inserted in a vast and deep discourse on prayer.<sup>11</sup>

### 2. “IN ORDER TO BE CURED”

Confession and intercession in Jas 5,16 are intended towards healing (*hopos iathete*). But in what sense must we understand the healing?

#### i) Physical or Metaphorical Healing

The fundamental meaning of the verb is that of physical healing. With such a meaning it is well attested in the Biblical Greek (cf. Mt 5,29; Lk 6,18). Yet, it is used also to indicate a metaphorical

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healing (cf. Is 57,18.19; 61,1[cited by Lk 4,18 according to some manuscripts]), especially that healing from sins which are seen as a sickness (Deut 30,3; Is 6,10 [cited by Mt 13,15 and Jn 12,40]; Is 53 5 [cited by 1Pet 2,24-25]; 2 Cor 30,20; Heb 12,13).<sup>12</sup>

The neat distinction that we make in the modern western culture between “physical” and “moral or spiritual” aspect cannot automatically be transferred to other cultures. Certainly this distinction is not that much clear in the biblical authors, including also James.

#### *ii) Context and the Ancient Translations*

The context of this verse authorizes interpreting the healing in reference to spiritual or moral state of sickness caused by sins.<sup>13</sup> This is how the Vetus Latina and the Vulgate have understood it. The Vetus Latina shows two readings: “ut salvemi” and “ut remittatur vobis,” while the Vulgate translates “ut salvemini.”

## **C. Conclusion**

Thus the analysis of the vocabulary of v. 16 against the context of Jas 5,13-20 permits us to comprehend clearly the content of the exhortation: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” It represents a development inside a wide parenthesis/exhortation in which the theme of prayer stands out. The thematic articulation of this section and the language of v. 16 betrays some characteristic traits of the author, like his sense of community and his preoccupation with avoiding sin and eliminating it once it is committed.