

The Complete Person: Maturity and Integrity According to James NT/TH 3XJ3

McMaster Divinity College
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Summer 2015
June 1—July 12 (Online)
June 19–20 (Face-to-Face)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Martin Luther is infamous for calling the Epistle of James “a right strawy epistle,” but most Christians ignore Luther’s straw man and embrace the Epistle as compelling and perennially relevant. Indeed, people often memorize and cherish the words of James, finding in them a practical yet radical ethic that is akin to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. In this course, we will explore James’ teachings and reflect upon their relevance for life in the twenty-first century. In particular, we will explore the emphasis that James places on maturity and integrity as hallmarks of the human life lived well.

SPECIALIZATIONS

Biblical Studies (BS)

Students taking this as a Biblical Studies course will be encouraged to explore the historical and cultural setting of the Epistle, as well as scholarly debates concerning the interpretation of its contents.

Pastoral Studies (PS)

Students taking this as a Pastoral Studies (PS) course will be encouraged to explore how the message of the Epistle is relevant for Christian faith and practice in the 21st century, with a special emphasis placed upon the matters of spiritual maturity and ethical integrity.

Christian Worldview (CW)

Students taking this as a Christian Worldview (CW) course will be encouraged to examine the Jewish worldview of the Epistle and to bring it into dialogue with 21st-century worldviews, with a primary goal being to discern what contemporary worldviews might learn from James.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

In this course, students will be encouraged to:

Knowing

- Remember the basic outline of James

- Become familiar with introductory issues and scholarly debates concerning James
- Understand the major theological and ethical teachings found in James

Being

- Appreciate the importance of participating in critical and respectful discussions concerning biblical texts
- Become sensitive to the historical and cultural environment in which the early church first communicated the gospel
- Become competent interpreters of the New Testament
- Embody the ethical seriousness that is so evident throughout the Epistle of James

Doing

- Read books that engage with James in a careful and critical manner
- Take time to reflect on the meaning of James
- Talk intelligently about James
- Discuss how James is relevant to contemporary Christianity

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Note: Students are required to complete all of the following assignments. No unfinished assignments are permitted. *Each written assignment should be uploaded in PDF format to the designated Avenue to Learn dropbox. A penalty of 2% per day will be applied to all late assignments. Assignments cannot be submitted after July 17th without written permission from the Office of the Registrar (thomn@mcmaster.ca).*

Reading and Participation (Total = 10%)

Online Readings and Online Discussion (10%)

During the period leading up to the in-class sessions (i.e. June 1–19), students will read a recent commentary on the Epistle of James (see the “Textbooks” section below for the acceptable commentaries) as well as a small number of brief readings made available through Avenue to Learn. An online form will give students the opportunity to report whether or not they have read the assigned readings. Also, an online discussion board will permit students to discuss the various readings with fellow students. The overall grade for this course requirement will be determined by both the student’s reading and the student’s participation in the online discussions, with both aspects including both quantity and quality (i.e. How much was read/discussed? And how thoughtfully was the material read/discussed?).

Face-to-Face Class Participation (0%)

Students are expected to attend class and to participate in class discussions. In addition, students will break in small groups in order to reflect upon James and discuss its contemporary relevance, and it is expected that students will participate in these small group discussions.

Interpretive Study of James (Total = 50%)

Part 1: Interpretive Essay Outline (7.5%)

Prior to the in-class sessions (i.e. by **11:59pm on Thursday, June 18th**), each student must submit a draft outline of their interpretive essay (see below) together with a preliminary list of secondary sources that will be used in the essay. There is no specific length requirement for the outline, but it should be kept in mind that a more complete outline will produce a more useful peer evaluation (see below). In order to make the most of the peer-evaluation process, students should attempt to submit a complete outline of the paper, including a rough draft of its contents and its logical argument. Because the outlines will be emailed to fellow students, students should refrain from including any self-identifying information in their submissions (e.g. no name on the title page). The Avenue to Learn system will keep track of whose assignment is whose.

Part 2: Evaluation of a Peer's Outline (7.5%)

Following the in-class sessions, each student's interpretive essay outline will be randomly distributed via email to a fellow student in the course. Each student will then produce an anonymous peer-evaluation of the outline he or she has received. This evaluation must assess the structure and content of the paper as well as the clarity and plausibility of its argument, and it must make specific recommendations for the improvement of these. It should also assess the secondary sources cited by the outline and (ideally) propose additional sources that might assist the author of the paper. Peer-evaluations must be emailed to the professor before **11:59pm on Sunday, June 28th** in PDF format. Please note that the grade for this component assesses whether or not the student has effectively assisted a fellow student's research and writing. The grade is *not* assigned by the peer evaluator as an assessment of the student's own essay outline.

Part 3: Interpretive Essay (35%)

For the major written assignment in this course, each student will write an interpretive essay that is approximately 3,500 words in length and that follows the "McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses." The paper must be grounded in a specific, well-defined passage from the Epistle of James, and it must incorporate the following three elements: (1) a discussion of the original historical context and the manner in which the passage addresses that context; (2) a comparison between the passage's original historical context and a specific 21st-century context clearly defined by the student; and (3) a discussion of the applicability of the passage to the specific 21st-century context. Although all student papers must include these three elements, the proportion of the paper that should be devoted to each element will vary depending upon the student's specialization:

- ❖ Biblical Studies. Students in the Biblical Studies specialization are required to devote the majority of their paper to the first of the three required elements. The essay should focus on scholarly debates regarding the original context of the Epistle (incl. date, author, addressees, etc.), the specific background of the selected passage (e.g. persecution, relationship between James and Paul, illness and healing, etc.), as well as the content and

meaning of the passage itself (e.g. textual variants, grammar, logical argumentation, theology, etc.).

- ❖ Christian Worldview. Students in the Christian Worldview specialization are required to devote the majority of their paper to the second required element. The essay should focus on how the ancient worldview presumed by the selected passage in James is similar to or different from a specific 21st-century worldview selected for consideration by the student.
- ❖ Pastoral Studies. Students in the Pastoral Studies specialization are required to devote the majority of their paper to the third of the three required elements. The essay should reflect deeply and responsibly on how the selected passage in the Epistle speaks into the specific 21st-century Christian community selected for consideration by the student.

The interpretive essay is due at **11:59pm on Sunday, July 12th**. For students who are uncertain about what constitutes an effective interpretive essay, a detailed grading rubric will be made available on A2L.

Hearing the Message of James (Total = 40%)

Part 1: Online Comment Endorsing the Epistle's Moral Seriousness (7.5%)

In the course of doing the assigned readings, students are expected to reflect upon the contemporary relevance of the Epistle's moral exhortations and to take notes on this topic. These notes will then be used in the composition of a positive argument in which the student defends the moral seriousness of the Epistle and argues that there is a deep need for this sort of moral seriousness in the church today. The argument will be presented as an online post written in response to a discussion board member. There will be an Avenue to Learn discussion topic with a description in which someone complains about the tedious moralism of James. Each student must start a new thread under this topic, inserting his or her response to the complaint as the starting post of the thread. The posts must be made to the Avenue to Learn discussion board before **11:59pm on Friday, June 12th**. They should be approximately 1,000 words and should thoughtfully respond to each of the main points argued in the initial complaint, employing New Testament citations and contemporary examples whenever relevant. After each student's response has been posted, he or she will be able to read and respond to the other posts so that the discussion can continue by means of follow-up replies.

Part 2: Online Comment Defending the Epistle's Theological Richness (7.5%)

Following the initial online "debate," the professor will initiate a new discussion topic. This time, the description of the topic will describe a complaint about James's lack of theological vision and his "obviously" underdeveloped theology. Once again, each student must begin a new thread and contribute a 1,000 word post to the discussion topic, this time **before 11:59pm on Tuesday, June 16th**. The post should defend the theological richness of James's thought and demonstrate that his theological vision fits within the broad stream of the New Testament as a whole. It must thoughtfully respond to each of the main points argued in the initial complaint,

employing citations both from James and from other New Testament writings. After each student's response has been posted, he or she will be able to read and respond to the other posts so that the discussion can continue by means of follow-up replies.

Part 3: Open Letter to the Church (25%)

Building upon the online comments just discussed, each student will compose an “open letter” to a well-defined 21st-century Christian community in which the student addresses the church with one of the following two arguments:

Option 1: The student may argue that the theological vision of the church needs to be better embodied in transformed lives and in patterns of behaviour that are fitting for people who claim to follow Jesus.

Option 2: The student may argue that the moral convictions and moral teachings of the church need to be enlivened by a richer awareness of God and a more robust theological vision with respect to God's vision for humanity and with respect to the work of Christ.

A cover page at the beginning of the assignment should describe the specific community that the student has in view (although the actual congregation/denomination in view need not be identified explicitly). Students are allowed to recycle content that has already been used in online discussion posts. The letter should be approximately the same length as the Epistle of James (i.e. 1,750 words), but unlike the Epistle, the student's letter must have a clearly discernable structure and logic and it must follow the “McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses.” It is due at **11:59pm on Sunday, July 5th**.

GRADING SUMMARY

Readings and Online Discussion	10%
Face-to-Face Class Participation	0%
Interpretive Essay Outline	7.5%
Evaluation of a Peer's Outline	7.5%
Interpretive Essay	35%
Post Endorsing Moral Seriousness	7.5%
Post Defending Theological Richness	7.5%
Open Letter to the Church	25%
Total	100%

TEXTBOOKS

Students are required to possess an English translation of the New Testament, as well as one of the following:

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Letter of James*. AB 37A. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

McKnight, Scot. *The Letter of James*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 304 The East Mall, Suite 100, Etobicoke, ON M9C 5K1: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Dates	Course Content
Part A (Online)	
June 1–7	Introductions, Various Assigned Readings, General Online Discussion, Two Online “Debates,” Interpretive Essay Outlines
June 8–14	
June 15–21	
Part B (Face-to-Face)	
June 19 9:00am–4:00pm	Introduction to the Epistle, Contents of the Epistle
June 20 9:00am–12:00pm	Contents of the Epistle (con't)
Part C (Online)	
June 22–28	Peer Evaluations
June 29–July 5	Open Letters
July 6–12	Interpretive Essays

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College.

Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty at:

<http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) for plagiarism detection and the student's continuation in the course represents his or her consent to the use of this service. If a student has objections to the use of this service, alternate arrangements for assignment submission must be made with the professor in advance of the assignment deadlines.

STYLE

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style *Guidelines for Essays and Theses*:

https://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/mdc_styleguide_june_2014.pdf

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all of its publications. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected. The NRSV and TNIV are examples of the use of inclusive language for human beings. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments.

This syllabus is for information only and remains the property of the respective professor. This syllabus is prepared with the best information available, but the professor reserves the right to change the content and format of the course.