

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 1 JAMES 1:1-12

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

What's the best food you prepare? (Or, for some, what's the only food you prepare?)

What are the ingredients? How do you prepare it? Can you bring some next week?

Leader: *Yes, this is just a casual icebreaker question, but it ties into a point Francis Chan will make in the video. So listen for some details that you can refer back to later.*

READ

Read James 1:1-12.

Leader: *Here in the first session, it's best to read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 1: James 1:1-12 (8 minutes)

DISCUSS

According to verse 1, who was the author of this letter?

Who was James? How does he describe himself?

According to tradition, this James was also the half-brother of Jesus, a son of Joseph and Mary. (NOTE: Roman Catholic teaching maintains that James was a cousin of Jesus.)

GO DEEPER *Learn more about James in the following set of Bible verses.*
Mark 6:3; John 7:3-5; Acts 1:14; Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9

How did James and the other brothers feel about Jesus' ministry at first? What changed?

How was James regarded in the early church?

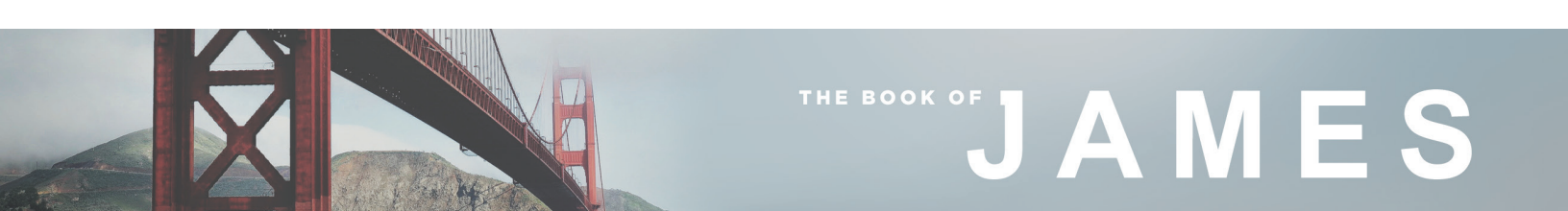
NOTE: James, the brother of John, was executed rather early in the church's history (Acts 12:2), so he wasn't the James who emerged as a church leader.

Why do you think James didn't introduce himself as the brother of Jesus? Wouldn't it help to say, "I know what I'm talking about, because I knew Jesus like a brother—in fact, I am His brother"?

Many possibilities here. Perhaps he was being humble, emphasizing his servanthood. Perhaps everyone already knew who he was. Perhaps he was a controversial figure and he wanted to keep the focus on the Lord.

According to verse 1, who are the recipients of this letter?

What does that mean? Why does James say it that way?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

“Twelve tribes” reflects language that points back to Israel, which originally had twelve tribes—each tracing their lineage back to one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The twelve tribes are used throughout Scripture to symbolize the fullness of God’s people. We see this picture carried on in the New Testament as Jesus chose twelve disciples—a clear reflection of the twelve tribes of Israel (See Matt. 19:28). In the book of Revelation the apostle John uses imagery of twelve tribes to denote the fullness of the people of God, now Jew and Gentile (Rev. 7:5–8; 21:12).

Through the centuries, many Jews had emigrated from their homeland in times of exile, war, famine, or economic hardship. This is known as the *diaspora*, which means “scattering.” The *diaspora*, or “Dispersion” as translated in the ESV, became a technical term for all places outside of Palestine where Jews lived. In Acts 8 we see the beginnings of a new Dispersion among Christ-followers. Persecution forced believers out of Jerusalem into Samaria, and eventually the far reaches of the Roman Empire.

So James is likely referring to Christ-followers, likely of Jewish decent, who had been scattered around the world as a result of persecution.

GO DEEPER Learn more about “the scattered” in the following Bible verses.
Acts 1:8; Acts 2:5, 8–11; Acts 8:1

Where would the followers of Jesus be “witnesses” (Acts 1:8)?

The people converted at Pentecost (Acts 2)—where were they from?

According to Acts 8:1, what caused the Christians to leave Jerusalem?

It’s important to recognize that this letter is distinctly Jewish. Where the letters of Paul are generally written to mixed groups of Jews and Gentiles, this letter is written to an audience who is thoroughly familiar with Jewish teaching.

According to James 1:2 and the following verses, how should we react when times get tough?

Why? What is the end result of this “testing”?

Do you remember what Francis Chan said about the word “testing” in the video? What word pictures did he paint for us?

Peek at the Greek

The word for testing (*dokimion*) was often used in metallurgy. Precious metals would be smelted—tested—by putting them through extreme heat and removing impurities. Francis talked about the tested metal being so pure you could see your reflection in it. In his word-picture, it’s God testing us and seeing His reflection in us. As we go through the heat, we become more like Him.

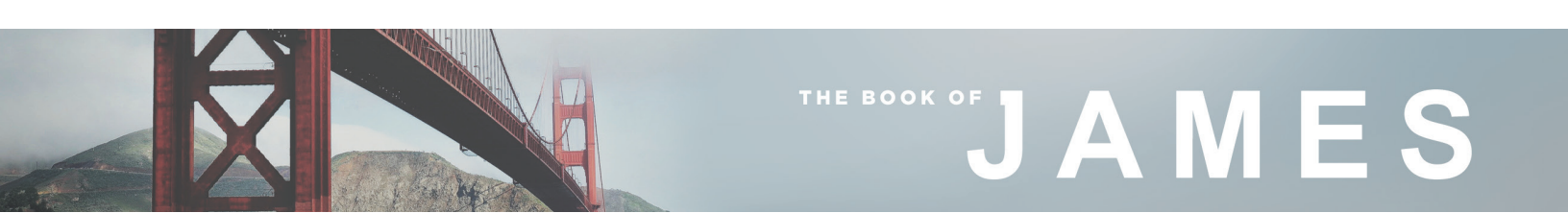
GO DEEPER Learn more about our approach to suffering in the following Bible verses.
Matthew 5:10–12; Romans 5:3–5

As you look at these two verses, in comparison to James 1:2–4, what similarities do you find? What are the differences?

There are many fascinating connections between the Sermon on the Mount, the book of Romans, and the book of James. We’ll trace some of these as we continue our study.

Francis Chan said in the video,

What God wants to do is not just to make you happy. He wants to make you holy. He wants you to be a reflection of Him and it’s the trials, the sufferings, that make us more like Christ. He says He wants us mature, complete, not lacking in anything. Have you ever thought about that as the goal of your life?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Do you think people expect God to make them happy? Is that a wrong idea?

If you made this the “goal of your life,” to grow in holiness even if it meant suffering, how would that change your life? What decisions would you make differently? How would you have to adjust your priorities?

Is that a realistic idea?

Later Francis talked about the ingredients involved in baking a cake. Individually, an egg, a stick of butter, a handful of flour taste bad. But together they’re delicious.

What was he saying there? What does that teach us about the sufferings we sometimes have to face?

GO DEEPER

*Learn more about God's plans in our difficulties in the following Bible verses.
Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28*

How do you think Joseph felt when he said this (Genesis 50:20) to his brothers, who had once kidnapped and sold him as a slave? How do you think they felt?

Do you think Romans 8:28 promises us that everything will turn out all right? Why do you think the verse mentions God’s “purpose”?

LAST WORD

Leader: *This is a time for some final questions and comments, for reflection more than discussion.*

How has God been “smelting” you? Has He been burning away some impurities? Has it been a painful process? How have you been growing through that process?

James talks a bit about doubting, and sometimes it seems like He’s scolding us. “Shame on you for doubting! You’re unstable in all you do! You won’t receive anything from the Lord!”

But maybe there’s another way to approach this.

As you look at verse 6, **when** should you have faith and not doubt? (“When you ask.”)

When you ask for what? (For wisdom.)

Why would you need wisdom?

Well, maybe because the testing of your faith leads to some tough decisions you have to make. Maybe you’re facing new challenges. And maybe you’re worried that you’ve got it all wrong, that Christianity isn’t the right way. If it was the right way, then why would God let you suffer like this?

When persecution drove the Christians out into the wider world, many of them had good reason to doubt. James is urging them to come to God with their problems, and to trust in His wise guidance. He says the same to us. Don’t jump in and out of your faith. Keep in touch with God through the difficulties, and He will get you through.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Conversation: Some of us complain a lot. What if we followed James and started considering our troubles “pure joy”? Who could you contact this week—by email, phone, text, or in person—and instead of complaining, tell them about the way God is helping you grow?

Journaling: Write about your struggles. Don't hold back. Complain all you want. But then go back to your journal the next day and jot some notes in the margins about how God might be making you “mature and complete.”

Memorization: Learn James 1:2–3, and maybe verse 4. This will be a powerful support to you in your toughest times.

Prayer: Consider others you know who are going through difficulties. Ask God to help them grow.

Influence: Have you seen spiritual growth in someone else who has gone through trials? Tell them so.

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SESSION 2 JAMES 1:13–18

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

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Watch

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Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

What's something you have bought that you really shouldn't have bought?

What made you want to buy it?

Why do you think you shouldn't have bought it?

Leader: *Avoid any hint of accusation here. Keep it light, non-threatening, but circle in on the idea of temptation. How do we get tempted to do things it would be better not to do?*

READ

Read James 1:13-18.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 2: James 1:13-18 (8 minutes)

DISCUSS

Earlier in the chapter, we learned that God uses trials to help us grow. But here James is talking about temptation. What's the difference?

Why is it important that we NOT blame our temptation on God?

GO DEEPER *Learn more about temptation in the following Bible passages.*
Genesis 3:1-7; 1 Corinthians 10:11-13; Hebrews 4:14-16

What do we learn from Genesis 3 about how temptation works? What does it prey upon? How does it succeed?

What do we learn from the two New Testament passages about how God helps us withstand temptation?

According to Francis Chan, how is temptation like fishing?

Here's what he said.

It's this picture of a fish going for the bait, like being lured. Something in him going, "I want to go for it, I want to go for it." We know that feeling—something that we know is wrong, but we want it anyways...There's something in us that longs for something that God says is wrong or evil, but we want it anyway...You have a choice at that moment. Just like that fish that's being lured away, either I go and I grab it, or I swim away.

Verses 14-15 describe something we might call the "life cycle of desire." What are the stages?

Does "evil desire" always bring forth "death"? How does this happen? What examples could you give?

In light of this, what's the best way to deal with our "evil desires"?

GO DEEPER Learn more about desire in the following Bible passage:
Romans 6:11-13

How is this teaching in Romans 6:11-13 similar to what we read in James?

How is it different?

Francis said in the video:

[James] says that's what sin's going to do to you. It's going to look so good and you're going to anticipate, "this is going to bring me pleasure"...but every single time it's going to lead to death. At some point, whether in this life or the next, it's going to end in this awful depression of, "Oh, I thought it was going to end well." And it ends in death and misery...and that's why he says in verse 16, "Do not be deceived."

Do you agree with that? Have you found that true in yourself or others?

Take note of "in this life or the next." Scripture acknowledges that sin can sometimes yield short-term pleasure, but it always ends in death. Always.

Why do you think James suddenly starts talking about "every good and perfect gift" in verse 17, after talking about evil desires? Is he just changing the subject (which he does sometimes), or is there a connection?

Why does he call God "the Father of lights"? What does that have to do with giving gifts?

How has God "brought us forth by the word of truth"?

What does he mean by "firstfruits of his creatures"?

GO DEEPER Learn more about the themes of James 1:17-18 in the following Bible passages

Genesis 1:3 - How did God create the "lights"?

John 1:12-14 - What does this tell us about being "brought forth by the word of truth"?

Romans 8:22-23 - What does this tell us about "firstfruits"?

Leader: Try this as a way of putting together the mixed metaphors of verses 17-18.

We are tempted by desires that glitter in front of us, promising fulfillment but leading only to the valley of the shadow of death. Don't be deceived by this flashy temptation. The gifts that are good and perfect come from our heavenly Father. He doesn't just glitter and fade; He shines on through all eternity. Remember how He created light in the first place. He merely spoke, and there was light. His Word is that powerful; it gives birth to things. So don't listen to the tempter's deceptive words; instead, listen to the true and powerful Words of God, who actually gives us birth through His Word. That's right: we have new birth in Jesus, who is the "Word made flesh." So, yes, it's difficult to live with the desires of our flesh, but our Father is recreating us in the image of His Son. And so we are the pioneers of redemption, the firstfruits, the initial offerings to God. The whole physical world is being reborn for the glory of God, and it begins with us.

■ LAST WORD

What God gives you is better than whatever is tempting you.

Do you believe that? Why?

It's hard to believe that when you're being tempted. We get easily distracted by the glitter, right? The promises of pleasure cause temporary blindness. But James tells us not to be deceived. Remember: God gives us a whole new life that is infinitely better than anything the tempter can offer.

We often assume that the best way to fight temptation is self-discipline. Grit your teeth and do the right thing. Just say no. And there's nothing wrong with saying no. But maybe there's a better approach—not just saying no, but saying YES to the kind of life God wants to give us.

In our closing today, I want you to think about your best strategy to fight temptation. You will be tempted—no question about that.

What can you do to prepare for temptation?

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Memorization: Learn 1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 4:15–16; Matthew 26:41; Psalm 51:10; and/or another verse that applies to a particular temptation you struggle with.

Journaling: Write about your temptations and how you respond, but also about the joys you experience when you resist temptation. How does your relationship with God grow and soar when you trust Him?

Prayer: Think about others you know who are being tempted. Pray that God will strengthen them. But don't let these be proud prayers—"watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Include The Lord's Prayer in this devotional time, with special focus on "Lead us not into temptation."

Accountability: Look for others you can share your struggles with. Can you arrange to meet with them every week or two, and let them know how you're doing? Fighting temptation can be a lonely business, but it doesn't have to be. When you know there's someone else holding you accountable, it might give you additional strength.

Joining or Volunteering: Our culture is full of temptations, and there are many whose lives have been ravaged by greed, lust, pride, or addictions of various sorts. There are also ministries that help those strugglers. Is there one you could connect with—as a volunteer, donor, or fellow struggler?

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 3 JAMES 1:19–27

Quick Start



Read

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Print

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Watch

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OPEN

Is there a commercial on TV, radio, or Internet that you really like? Why?

Have you actually bought the product which that commercial is selling? Why or why not?

What's the difference between liking an ad and acting on it?

READ

Read James 1:19–27.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 3: James 1:19–27 (12 minutes)

DISCUSS

James tells us to be “quick to hear, slow to speak.” Have you had situations where you did the opposite—slow to hear, quick to speak? What's the problem with that?

What does James say about anger?

Is there such a thing as “righteous indignation”? Do you think that sometimes God wants us to get angry about certain things? Then what do you do with verse 20?

What “word” is he talking about in verse 21? How is it “implanted” in us? (Is this the same as the “word of truth” in verse 18, through which we were “brought forth”? What's the connection?)

GO DEEPER

*Learn more about our connection with the “word” in the following set of Bible verses.
Psalm 119:11; Jeremiah 20:9; John 15:7; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 4:12.
Also James 1:18, 21, 22.*

In what ways is God's Word “in” us?

What effect does it have on us?

What does that look like in our lives?

In verse 21, when James talks about getting rid of “filthiness and rampant wickedness,” we think we know what he means. There is plenty of filth in our world too. We generally think of lust and various sins associated with it. But look at the context. James has just been talking about *anger*, and he goes on to say that the alternative to filth is to “receive with meekness” the word. So maybe this “filth” also involves *pride*. A quick look at the list of sins in Galatians 5:19–21 (the “works of the flesh” in contrast to the “fruit of the Spirit”) reveal the same thing. That list includes sins of anger and pride as well as lust.

Remember that James was writing to an audience of mostly Jewish believers scattered around the world. They would have likely had a strong moral upbringing in the Jewish faith. They would already be rejecting the *lustful* filth of their Gentile neighbors, you would think. But maybe James is challenging them to get rid of sins of anger and pride as well. It's always easy for us to rail against the kind of sin that other people commit. It's harder to confront our own.

Peek at the Greek

If you want to dig even deeper, consider this. The Greek word for “filth” (*rhyparia*) is found only here in the New Testament, but a related word (*rhyparos*) occurs in James 2:2 and in the Greek translation of Zechariah 3:3-4. Those references involve filthy or shabby clothing. In Zechariah, it’s a strong picture of salvation—God cleansing the high priest. This leads some experts to suggest that James is following a baptismal liturgy—removal of “shabby” garments, then cleansing, then listening to the Word.

Moving on to James 1:22, how do we “deceive ourselves” by just listening to God’s Word?

What is that mirror thing all about (in James 1:23-24)?

In the video, Francis said,

What was the point of looking in the mirror? The whole point of looking in the mirror is because you want to see your reflection, and you know whatever you need to do, maybe I missed a spot shaving, or whatever it is. But if I’m not going to remember what I look like, there was no point whatsoever. In the same way, if you’re going to a Bible study and you’re not actually going to do something about it, if you’re going to sit in a church service and there’s no action, or doing, or deeds afterwards, James says, Why do you even do that? It’s worthless.

Does that make sense to you? Do you have another example?

Do you think it’s really “worthless” to hear God’s Word without doing it? Why or why not?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about “hearing and doing the Word” in the following Bible verses.
Matthew 7:24-27; Matthew 15:8-9; Matthew 21:28-32; Matthew 23:1-3; Romans 2:13

How does the Lord feel about those who know His Word but don’t follow it?

How does that affect their lives?

In verse 25, what does James call God’s law?

In what way is the law “a law of liberty”? Wouldn’t you think it does the opposite?

Verses 26-27 focus on “religion.” How would you define “religion”?

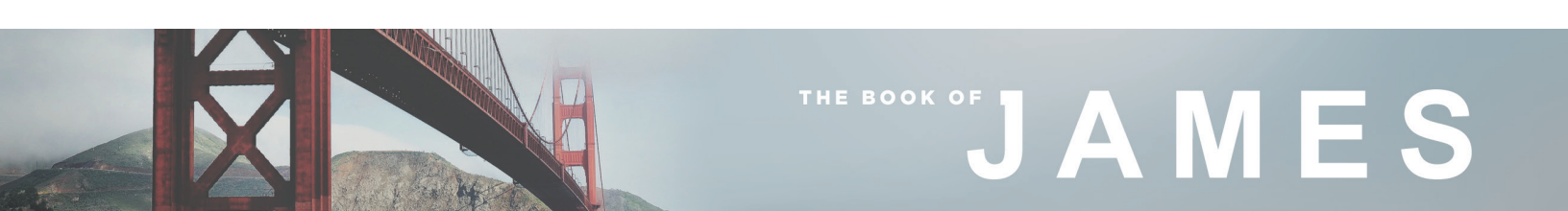
Do you think of religion as a good thing or not? Do you think your neighbors think of religion as a good thing?

A lot of people these days consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” To them, religion seems narrow, restrictive, maybe even hateful toward people outside the religion.

For the last several decades, many Christians have emphasized that their faith is about “a relationship not a religion.” That is, it’s not about following rules or rituals, but a connection with God through Jesus.

The Greek word James uses here for “religion” is rather rare in the New Testament. The other two uses of the word refer to the strict practices of the Pharisees (Acts 26:5) and the cult-like worship of angels (Colossians 2:18). Apart from James (possibly), the New Testament doesn’t tell people to be more “religious.”

With that in mind, do you think James is using the term “religion” in a positive way? Why or why not?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

In verses 26–27, how does James define “religion”?

There are three specific actions he includes in his definition. What are they?

Why do you think he mentions these three? Aren’t there other good deeds he could name?

GO DEEPER *Learn more about the components of religion in the following Bible verses.*

Psalm 24:3–5; Isaiah 1:17; Philippians 2:14–15

How are these elements defined and described?

What is the view of “purity” reflected in these passages?

■ LAST WORD

James is writing to religious people. They have probably grown up in the Jewish faith. They know God’s law. But James keeps pushing them to take the next step. Don’t just hear it—do it! Don’t just reject the immorality of the culture around you, but also be careful about your own anger and pride. And if you think you’re religious, great! But what do you mean by that? Saying no to worldly temptation is a great start—God loves that—but He also loves it when we care for the neediest people in the community. And beyond that, are you careful about what you say?

Maybe you consider yourself religious, too. Maybe you have been a Christian for some time now. You have this faith thing figured out. But James keeps pushing us to move on. Do we listen more than we speak? Do we keep our anger in check? Are we careful about what we say? Do we put into practice what we hear in God’s Word? Do we let God’s implanted Word grow within us?

There are probably some parts of the Christian religion that you do pretty well. But it needs to be more than just a set of rules and rituals. It is God’s powerful Word at work within us.

So what is the next step for you? What issue is James calling you to confront?

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let’s consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Memorization: Learn James 1:22. Perhaps you could write it out on a card, which you put (appropriately) on your mirror.

Conversation: Do you need to develop the ability to be “quick to hear, slow to speak”? Is there a particular person in your life with whom you should do more listening? Work on this. You might even think of some questions to ask in your next conversation. Focus on them, not on your own responses.

Journaling: If you have a Bible study journal, add this component. If not, try journaling this week. Take the next six pages and put four headings on each page. Read. Think. Pray. Do! Then select Scriptures to read each day. As you do, record your thoughts on the text, write out key words of a prayer, and then—because of James—figure out something God would like you to do in response to that text. Oh, yeah—and then do it.

Prayer: Pray specifically about two things this week. (1) Your anger. (Even if you’re not hot-tempered, do you “stuff” your anger and let it turn into bitterness?) (2) Soul pollution. Ask God to show you ways you might be getting “polluted” by the world.

“Widows and Orphans.” In many parts of Scripture—and here in James—we are urged to care for the neediest members of society. In your area, who are these people, and how can you help? It’s possible they are, literally, widows and orphans, having suffered the loss of a family member. But also consider the homeless, the hospitalized, retirees, special-needs children and adults, the unemployed, immigrants, prisoners, etc. See if your church has a ministry you could support and become involved with, but also consider parachurch ministries and other charities.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 4 JAMES 2:1-13

Quick Start



Read

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Watch

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Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

Who's the most famous person you've ever met?

How did this happen?

How did you react to this person?

READ

Read James 2:1-13.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 4: James 2:1-13 (7 minutes)

DISCUSS

Okay, let's be honest. Suppose the scene described in verses 2-3 were to happen this week in our church. What do you think would happen? How would we treat the two people differently?

Why would we do what we do?

What does James have to say about this?

Let's look at this practically. Think of all that a rich person can contribute to the church. You could fund all sorts of new ministries. Wouldn't it make sense to provide first-class treatment, so the rich person would want to come back and maybe become a member and maybe give money and maybe bring a lot of rich friends?

Why isn't James considering that argument?

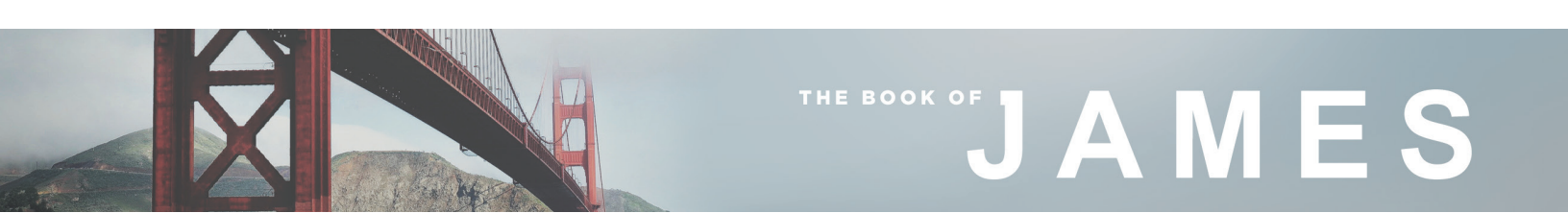
GO DEEPER *Learn more about favoritism in the following Bible passages.*
Luke 7:36-50; Luke 14:7-11 Acts 10:34-35

In Luke 7, what was the Pharisee's attitude toward the "sinful woman"? Do you think this was reasonable? What point did Jesus make?

In Luke 14, what does Jesus say about social occasions and social status?

In Acts 10, when Peter says that God does not show favoritism, what does he mean?

In James 2:5-7, what does it say about the poor and the rich?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

It's not clear exactly what James is referring to, regarding lawsuits and blasphemy. Since this is a general epistle, to people in many different places, he must be writing about a general pattern of behavior rather than a specific lawsuit. It's not hard to imagine that wealthy people—landlords, business owners, etc.—routinely used the courts to protect and build their assets at the expense of the poor, even in the Christian community. Old Testament prophets mentioned legal corruption that favored the rich (Isaiah 1:23; Amos 5:12). The apostle Paul told the Corinthian Christians not to take each other to court, but to settle disputes fairly among themselves (1 Corinthians 6:1–6). The reference to blasphemy might be based on Jesus' identification with the poor. Mistreatment of the poor is not just a crime against humans, but a sin against the Lord, who stands with them (see Proverbs 14:31; Matthew 25:40).

Do you think the poor are really rich in faith? Why would James say that?

How does this connect with the previous point about favoritism?

Do you think James is promoting a “reverse favoritism,” in which we welcome and honor the poor *more than* the rich?

GO DEEPER *Learn more about the poor and the rich in the following Bible passage:*
Luke 6:20–26; Matthew 25:31–46; Matthew 19:16–26; Matthew 6:24; 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19.

Based on these passages, what's the problem with wealth? What advantage do the poor have?

If you have money, how can you keep yourself from loving it, serving it, or trusting in it?

What is the “royal law” James mentions in verse 8?

Why does he call it that?

How does showing favoritism break that law?

According to verses 10–12, how would James respond to someone who said, “I’ve kept seven of the Ten Commandments. That’s a passing grade, right?”

According to that standard, are you a “transgressor” of the law?

How do you feel about that? Does that seem harsh to you?

GO DEEPER *Compare this view of the law to three others.*
Matthew 5:19, 21–22, 48 (and the verses in between, if you like); Romans 2:1–3; Galatians 3:10.

Is the point that James makes significantly different from the points in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) or in Paul’s letters to the Romans or Galatians?

If it is so difficult to keep God’s law perfectly, can we ever please Him?

In James 2:12, James speaks again of the “law of liberty” (see 1:25). But his previous comments seem to be more restrictive, forcing us to keep every point in the law. How does the law give us freedom?

Two key words appear in verse 13. Let’s define them. What is judgment? What is mercy?

How does the idea of mercy bring us back to the matter of showing favoritism?

In the video, Francis Chan said this,

The good news is that we can be called sons and daughters of the living God! And if He's shown us that kind of mercy, then we should be out doing that for others. The last thing we should be doing is showing favoritism—"Let me look for the people that I really like and show favors to them." James says no, let me live a life that reflects the gospel, meeting people that I wouldn't normally associate with, people who have nothing to offer me. Let me just love them like crazy, like God did for me.

Does that make sense to you?

Is there anything you would add?

LAST WORD

This passage is about two things. Once you think you know what it's about, James goes somewhere else, and then he circles back to the start. He is writing to very religious people—remember that. In fact, they likely have a background in two religions: Judaism and Christianity. They have already been taught to live by the law of God and the teachings of Jesus. They're not murderers and thieves. They have "respectable" sins. In this way, they're probably a lot like us.

We can figure out from this letter what the problems were. Those people gossiped sometimes. They got angry with one another. And when a rich person showed up at the church door, they shoved poor folks aside to clear the path.

So that's the first challenge James offers in this chapter: **Do we show favoritism?**

It's natural to get nervous around celebrities [as we learned in today's opening question]. No one would blame us for favoring the rich folks who show up to worship with us. It's normal behavior. *Except it goes against all the truth of God.* The rich don't deserve special treatment; in fact, the poor do. Doesn't the kingdom of God belong to them?

That's the first thing this passage is about: **favoritism**. But then James jumps to a second point—**lawbreaking**.

He addresses his very religious readers and says, "You are lawbreakers. If you have ever said an unkind thing, if you have ever cursed the chariot driver who cut you off on the Appian Way, and if you have ever shown favoritism—then you're no better than a murderer. You have broken God's law. You deserve his judgment."

For centuries, Christian scholars have set up a debate between James and Paul. We'll get into that more next time as James teaches about faith and works, but here James sounds very much like Paul. All of us have sinned, even religious folks. All deserve judgment. But guess what, God offers you mercy, so receive it. His mercy triumphs over judgment.

And once we realize how much we depend on God's mercy, it's hard to show favoritism to the rich. Instead, we value the poor, because they have mastered the one thing God wants above all else: relying on Him for everything they have.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Memorization: Learn the Beatitudes. Matthew 5:3–12 or Luke 6:20–26. In a succinct way, these describe the reordering of the world from God's perspective.

Seek counsel: If you have been working hard to keep God's rules, and you're troubled by this assertion that breaking even one command makes you a lawbreaker, talk with a pastor or teacher about this. Ask how to unpack the idea of God's "mercy."

Evaluation: If you are in a position of authority in the church, take this opportunity to evaluate the church's response to visitors—not just the stated policies, but the actual behaviors. Is favoritism shown? If so, what can you do about it?

Serving: Can you get involved in a ministry to the poor and homeless in your community? Many such ministries need volunteers and financial support. If you can't find one to connect with, perhaps you could start one.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 5 JAMES 2:14–26

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

Are you a gardener? A farmer? Or do you kill houseplants?

What sort of plant, flower, or produce do you like the most?

Do you have any “secrets of success” in growing things?

READ

Read James 2:14–26.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 5: James 2:14–26 (7 minutes)

DISCUSS

This passage has been at the heart of a faith-and-works controversy for centuries. Are we saved by the good works we do, or by faith in Christ? That’s an important question, and we’ll get back to it. But maybe James is dealing with a very different question: *What is the nature of genuine faith in Christ?* In other words, what does it look like? What effect does it have in our lives?

In verses 15–16, James gives us a YouTube video, sort of. It would be a clever comedy sketch if it weren’t so sad. How does it go?

What’s the answer to the question in verse 16? What good is it to offer good wishes but no practical help?

Our faith, apart from any outworking, apart from any works is *dead*. In the video Francis put it this way,

I don’t know if James could have picked stronger language. It doesn’t matter what you say if you don’t act, it’s dead. Your faith—I don’t care how much you talk about it—it’s pointless, it’s worthless, it’s dead.

In verse 18, we see two kinds of faith. How are they described?

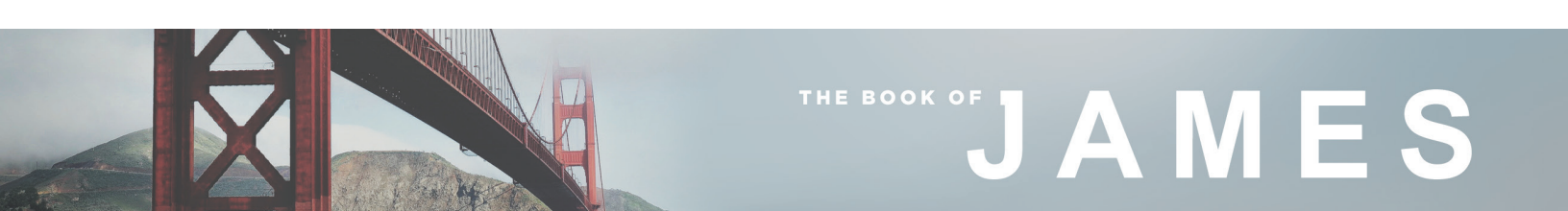
Don’t get confused by who’s the “you” and who’s the “someone.” The beginning of the verse just sets up a binary challenge—you either have faith or works. But the next part of the verse challenges that. Both people have faith. One person has faith without works and the other *shows* his faith *by* his works.

So the two kinds of faith are “with” and “without” works—a living faith and a dead faith.

So then, verse 19 is referring to the “without works” kind of faith. What does it say about that kind of faith?

Faith in the fact that there is one God is good, but not remarkable, James says. It puts you on a par with demons. In fact, demons might be a bit ahead of you, because when they think about God they “shudder.” At least their faith brings about some response—shuddering. If you believe in God and there is no impact in your life, no actions that result from that, then that faith is essentially “dead” (as he says in verse 17).

Why do you think James chooses the oneness of God as the example of basic faith, and not, say, the atoning death of Jesus?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Leader: *This is a tough question, and your group might come up with good theories to solve it. God's oneness was, of course, the central tenet of Jewish faith (see Deuteronomy 6:4, which is regularly recited in Hebrew tradition). We know James is writing this to Jewish Christians. Could he also be writing to Jews who have not yet accepted Jesus as Savior, or maybe they're on the fence about it? Could this whole faith-and-works argument be calling these Jews from a generic Jewish faith to a life-changing Christian faith?*

Or maybe James is just choosing the lowest common denominator of belief—"one God"—because he knows a thorough faith in Christ as Savior unleashes the Spirit's power to lead us into these good works.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about faith and works in the following Bible passages.

Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 3:7-10; Galatians 6:7-8; Matthew 7:16-23; John 6:28-29.

Are good works unimportant or all-important in the Christian's life? Or something in between?

What role do they have? How would you describe it?

When these passages mention faith (or knowing Jesus or following Him), what kind of faith are they talking about?

How do you think James would respond to any of these verses? "Yeah, but..."? Or, "Exactly"?

In James 2:20-24, there's reference to Abraham as proof of the point. What's the argument here? How does Abraham prove that "faith without works is useless"?

Leader: *You might want to reread these verses aloud.*

Background: James refers to a story from Genesis 22. God tells Abraham to take his son, Isaac, up a mountain, to build an altar, and then to sacrifice him. Isaac, you may recall, was a miracle baby, born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Imagine how Abraham would feel about killing him. The story begins by saying that God was testing Abraham. It was quite a test.

Abraham did as instructed, and he got as far as raising the knife to slay his son on the altar, but then God sent an angel to stop him. Abraham passed the test.

How did these actions demonstrate Abraham's faith?

James quotes a verse from Genesis (15:6). What does that say about Abraham's faith? What does it say about his works?

How did Abraham's actions in Genesis 22 "fulfill" the statement of Genesis 15:6?

GO DEEPER

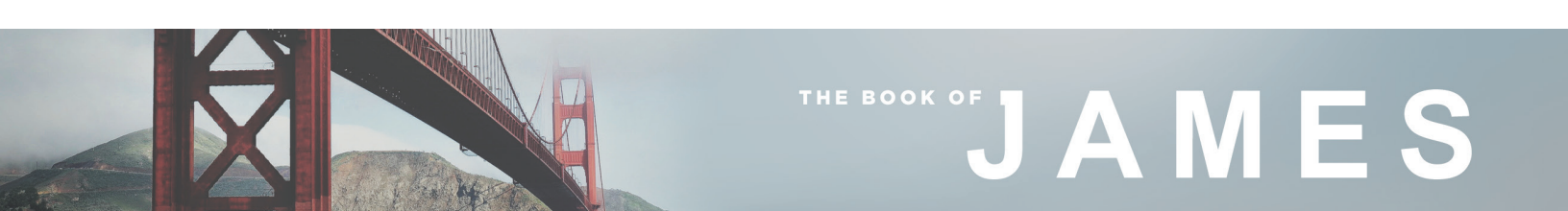
Learn more about Abraham's faith in the following Bible passages.

Genesis 12:1-4; Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:1-3, 18-24; Hebrews 11:8-9, 17-19

How did Abraham act on his faith?

What exactly was Abraham believing in?

According to the passages in Romans and Hebrews, what are the implications for us? What can we learn about faith and works?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Leader: *Whether or not you use the Go Deeper portions in the lesson, you should read Romans 4 for yourself, so you're clear on these points. Here's a possible sum-up.*

In Romans 4, the apostle Paul uses the exact same verse from Genesis to make what seems to be the opposite point, that Abraham was considered righteous because of his faith, not his works. This has led many people to assume that James and Paul were in sharp disagreement on this matter. But what was Paul talking about, and what is James saying here?

Paul makes the point that, when Abraham was "considered righteous" in Genesis 15, the Jewish law had not yet been given, nor was the ritual of circumcision observed yet. So this code of conduct and ritual that would later define righteousness for the Jews—it didn't exist yet. There was only his faith.

But what kind of faith was it? That's what James wants to know. Was it just believing that God existed? No, it also involved acting on that belief. It was faith with works. But James isn't talking about following rituals or keeping the law. He's talking about letting your faith propel you to feed the hungry. Faith brings you into a relationship with God—He becomes your "friend" (see James 2:23)—and so you do the things that express your love for God.

Do you think it's significant that the faith of Genesis 15 came several chapters before the works of Genesis 22? Does faith generally come first?

Take a look at verse 25. Why would James go on to talk about Rahab?

What do you know about Rahab? What was her occupation?

How did she get herself mentioned in the Bible?

Background: Rahab was a prostitute in the Canaanite city of Jericho. She sheltered the Israelite spies and aided in the conquest of the city. In the process, she expressed faith in the God of Israel.

Isn't it a mistake for James to mention a prostitute as an example of good works? Why would he do this?

Abraham and Rahab stand as almost two extremes. In the video Francis gave James' reasoning for including these two examples,

He gives these extremes and he goes, "Everyone, it's about actions." Abraham was about actions, Rahab was about actions...what more do I have to show you and at the very end he just says, "Look as the body apart from the spirit is dead so also faith apart from works is dead."

GO DEEPER *Learn more about Rahab in the following Bible passages.*
Joshua 2:1-13; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31

How would you describe Rahab's "statement of faith," especially in Joshua 2:11?

Why do you think she was one of the four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus?

How did her actions demonstrate her faith?

Peek at the Greek

In verse 26, "spirit" is a translation of the Greek word *pneuma*. This word refers to that which gives life to the body. In some places *pneuma* is translated "breath."

With the meaning of *pneuma* in mind, take another look at verse 26.

How does that affect your understanding of that verse?

■ LAST WORD

Body and breath go together. They need each other. You can have a body without breath, but that would be a corpse. James says it's the same thing with faith and works. Let's stop trying to rip them apart. When faith is genuine, it results in good works. We trust the Holy Spirit to motivate us. The love of God fills our hearts, so we respond to the needs of those around us.

Now you can get wrapped up in theological debates about whether faith or works is more important, but that misses the point. True faith changes you. Faith flows into works. The two are inseparable.

Earlier we talked about growing things—whether you're a gardener or a farmer or a person with houseplants. Plants grow. That's what they do. Fruit trees bear fruit. And people with genuine faith in Christ put out the fruit of good works. James is not saying that we earn salvation by being good or doing good. He's saying that a fruitless faith is pointless, worthless. It's not really faith.

We should also note a subtle difference between believing *that* and believing *in*. James uses the example of believing *that* there is one God. There are all sorts of ideas and doctrines we can believe about God and about Jesus, but trusting *in* Christ is the key—putting ourselves in his hands. When we do that, it begins a relationship that radically alters how we live. When we believe *in* our powerful Lord, like Abraham and Rahab, we will find that our faith is confirmed by our actions.

Leader: *The Bible talks about both kinds of belief—"that" and "in"—but we are called to believe that some pretty amazing things are true: Jesus is Lord, Jesus rose from the dead, etc. It would be hard to believe those doctrines mentally without committing to Christ personally.*

You should also be sensitive about your church's particular theology of faith and works. People always seem worried about hypotheticals. "What if I raised my hand in Vacation Bible School, but then committed a lot of sins?" Your church may have an answer to that, and you should be ready with it. But James (like Paul) leads us beyond the hypotheticals, into the reality of saving faith that results in a changed life.

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Evaluation: Talk with God about your own faith. Do you have "faith with works" or "faith without works"? Ask Him to give you the power you need to put your faith into action.

Conversation: Talk with at least one other close Christian friend about this question: *Is my faith more on the inside or the outside?* Both are good. Both are important. But if you just *feel* your faith and don't *show* it, you're out of balance. (It's also possible to tilt the other way, doing stuff for God, but not taking time for personal growth.)

Research: James is very specific about the needs we should be responding to—the needs of widows and orphans, as well as those who need food or clothing. Where do these needs exist in your region? And what are the best ways to help such people? Join with some others in a research projects, and share your findings with this group, or your whole church.

Serving: Can you put yourself on a regular schedule of volunteering with some ministry or charity? Tutoring each week? Staffing a soup kitchen each month? Doing a work day once a quarter? Don't just think about doing these things. Plan something and do it.

Donation: Some ministries are desperate for funds. Challenge your church leaders to support worthy helping ministries, and lead by example by giving your money to support them as well.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 6 JAMES 3:1-12

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

Can you tell us about something someone said to you—anytime in your life—that was truly helpful?

It doesn't have to be life-changing, but helpful in some way. Encouragement. Good advice. Knowledge you needed. Support. What words provided help when you needed it?

What was so helpful about it?

Why do you think the person said it?

READ

Read James 3:1-12

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 6: James 3:1-12 (8 minutes)

DISCUSS

If you were publishing this passage as an article or a blog post, what title would you give it?

Why do you think James wrote this? What problem was occurring that he was trying to correct?

Remember that this is a *general* letter, not sent to a specific church, but distributed to Christians throughout the world. So this can't be an issue of a few gossips spreading slander. James must have been concerned about churches in general. Apparently there were people speaking badly—boasting about themselves, cursing others, picking fights. James tells them all to shape up.

Who is being “called out” by James in verse 1? Why do you think teachers will be judged with greater strictness?

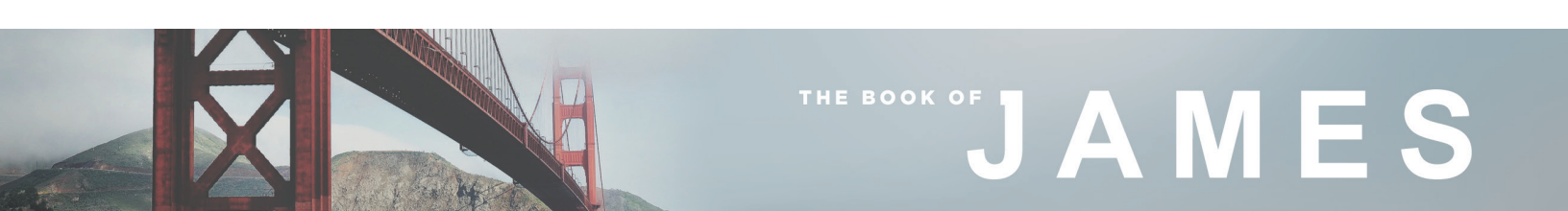
This is a warning that each of us should take to heart—whether we're in a teaching position or not. Francis said,

We live in a day in age when everyone wants to be the teacher, everyone wants to be the one who gives advice, everyone wants to be the expert, and James is going to argue, are you sure you want to do that? Because God is going to judge you more harshly for being a teacher.

What do you think verse 2 has to do with verse 1? Is it explaining the behavior of errant teachers, excusing them, or just generally instructing us?

Peek at the Greek

Don't get thrown off by the word *perfect*. It can also be translated “mature” or “complete.” It's the same word used in James 1:4 for the person who develops patience through trials. So James is not saying that people who control their tongues are sinless. In fact, he has just said that we all stumble in many ways. It's just that the one who avoids stumbling *in speech* is apparently a mature believer.



THE BOOK OF JAMES

We see the word **body** at the end of verse 2. That word can actually mean several different things in the New Testament. What do you think it means here?

And then how does mastery of one's speech keep the whole body in check?

The most basic meaning of *body* is our physical existence. If we read it this way, James is saying that those who control their speech are also able to control their physical actions.

But *body* is used elsewhere in the New Testament for the church, "the body of Christ." If this verse is still talking about teachers, then it might mean that those who master their speech are able to control (keep in check, literally "bridle") the *church*.

Have you ever seen a church dispute settled by a leader who spoke wisely, clearly, and kindly? How did that happen?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about false teachers in the following Bible passages.

2 Tim. 2:14-18; Titus 1:10-14; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 10, 16

After reading these verses, how serious do you think the problem of false teaching was in the early church?

What sort of "quarreling about words" do you think Paul was talking about in 2 Timothy 2?

Note the emphasis on **speaking** in all these passages. Do you think the writers are too sensitive about minor sins like grumbling and flattery?

Looking now at James chapter 3 verses 3-6:

How is the tongue like a bit in a horse's mouth?

How is it like the rudder of a ship?

How is it like a fire?

It's like Francis said,

Your tongue can be that little spark that can destroy so much. Where one careless sentence can destroy a relationship, can ruin someone else's life, can lead someone else into depression or into a spiral.

Do you think these comparisons make more sense regarding individual behavior or regarding leadership of a church? Or perhaps both?

Do you think it's really impossible to "tame the tongue," as it says in verse 8?

How would a person do this? If you tried to tame your speaking habits, how would you go about it?

GO DEEPER

*Learn more about the importance of what we say in the following Bible passages.
Psalm 19:14; Philippians 2:14–16; Hebrews 10:24–25; Proverbs 10:31–32*

According to these passages, how important is what we say?

What different “audiences” are described here? Who’s listening to us?

Do you get any ideas here about how to control your tongue?

How would you describe the situation in verses 9–12?

Who is James talking about? What can we guess about these people?

Verse 9 fits with the inferences James has been making all along. He’s talking to people who hear the Word of God but don’t obey it. They want to be religious, and they say nice things to beggars, but they don’t actually help people in need. What’s more, they can’t stop saying nasty things about other people. They seem slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry. The opening verses of chapter 3 might suggest that some of these people are leading churches. So they’re leading the songs of praise to God, but then they bad-mouth other people.

James says it clearly: This ought not to be so.

■ LAST WORD

The tongue is a powerful force for all of us, and it affects the way we influence others. Whether you lead a church or a small group or a family, what you say will have a huge impact.

At the start of this session, we talked about helpful things that were said to us. Think about the influence those words had on you. Think of the influence your words can have on your children, your neighbors, your students, your friends. You have great power in your hands—no, not in your hands, but in your mouth. Power to do good or to do harm.

How could you help or harm people by what you say this week?

Turn on the TV or the radio or the Internet, and chances are, you’ll hear someone talking. And it’s even likely that you’ll hear someone criticizing other people. It’s easy for us to get swept into that. After all, we say, those other people are wrong! They’re stupid! They’re evil! They deserve our criticism! But God still loves those people, doesn’t He? How can we praise God one minute and in the next minute tear down people God loves? This should not be.

Francis closed his teaching with some words that require reflection. He said,

If all that is coming out of this mouth is negativity, slander, cursing, hurting other people, speak negatively about other people then I have to go, “Okay maybe my heart really wasn’t changed. Did the Holy Spirit really enter into me? Am I really a new creation?”

It’s impossible to tame the tongue. No human can do it, but God can. Ask the Lord to give you a tongue that seeks to bless Him and bless others. May the words of our mouths be acceptable to Him.

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Memorization: Learn James 3:9–10. This isn't your normal type of memory verse, but it might prove helpful in real-life situations.

Stop-Phrase: When you find yourself speaking badly about someone, stop—in mid-sentence if you need to. Find a phrase to run through your mind in those cases. Maybe it's James 3:9–10. Maybe it's just “This should not be.” Or maybe it's a more positive statement like “Bless the Lord, O my soul” or the prayer from Psalm 19:14.

Encouragement: Think of three people you can encourage this week, and do so. Be as specific as possible. Can you bolster their confidence or their faith?

Thanks: Who has encouraged you in the past? Who has spoken words into your life that truly helped you? Can you find them and thank them for that?

Media Fast: Many of us learn unkind habits of communication from talk radio, cable news, or online videos. If this is a problem for you, engage in a “fast,” abstaining from those media sources for a period of time—perhaps the next seven days. Then re-evaluate.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 7 JAMES 3:13–18

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

What was your best subject in school? Why did you excel in this?

What was your worst subject? How bad was it?

Thankfully (for most of us), knowledge is not the same as wisdom. We'll be learning more about wisdom today from the book of James.

READ

Read James 3:13–18

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 7: James 3:13–18 (8 minutes)

DISCUSS

Verse 13 starts off with a question, so let's answer it. Who is the wisest person you know, or have known?

Why do you say that? How did they show their wisdom?

We started off today by talking about our best subjects in school. Were these wise people in your life also the smartest people you've known? Or is wisdom something different from intelligence?

What do verses 13–15 tell us about what wisdom is and isn't?

In the video Francis described it this way,

Wisdom is not about education...wisdom is about action. It's about character. James says if you have wisdom from above... then [you're] going to be pure. There's going to be a holiness about your life.

Leader: *If you have a whiteboard available, you might create two columns—"True Wisdom" and "False Wisdom." You can add to it as the discussion continues.*

Verse 13 talks about a "good conduct"? How would you define that? What kind of "good conduct" does a wise person exhibit?

Why is meekness part of true wisdom?

Have you known people who thought they were wise but really weren't? Were they meek? Did they show humility?

Francis pointed to this tendency in many of us.

We live in a time where everyone wants to give advice. They want to tweet, they want to show off their wisdom, but it's interesting the Bible says the person who truly has wisdom is going to have a meekness about himself or about herself. It's not arrogance. It's gentleness.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about wisdom in the following Bible passages.

Psalm 90:12; Proverbs 9:10-12; Ecclesiastes 1:17-18; Jeremiah 9:23-24; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

What do these verses teach us about what wisdom is and isn't?

Do they confirm what James is saying, or provide a different perspective?

How does “numbering our days” (Psalm 90) bring wisdom?

How does wisdom bring sorrow (Ecclesiastes)?

In these passages, what is the relationship between wisdom and boasting?

The Bible has a great amount of teaching about wisdom. These are just a few of the passages we could consult. One regular theme is that true wisdom doesn't crow about itself. The wise person recognizes his or her own limitations and does not boast. Wisdom is a sober thing, with understanding of the sorrows of life as well as the joys. The wise person knows how short life is and has a healthy fear of the Lord.

Now we need to use our imaginations.

Why would James write these verses? What problem existed in his world that made him say this?

We might assume that there were people who claimed to be wise, but they harbored “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.” They were boastful. Perhaps these were the same teachers who had trouble controlling their tongues (see James 3:1-12). Did this mean they were bad-mouthing those who disagreed with them?

What were they disagreeing about? Well, we know that there were substantial disagreements in the early church, mostly about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Would Gentiles be accepted in the church? Would they be forced to keep the Jewish law? Could Jews and Gentiles worship together? There were also questions about who Jesus was—human or divine. And there were various cults afflicting the church, some imposing new rules and some involving the worship of angels.

We know most of this from the apostle Paul. In fact, in his letters to the Corinthians, he describes some people who apparently called themselves “super-apostles.” These people were proud and boastful, ambitious, envious of Paul, and they criticized him (see 2 Corinthians 10-11; also Colossians 2:20-23).

Was James writing about the same people? Maybe not, but it was at least the same sort of situation.

Leader: Ask someone to read Matthew 7:15-20.

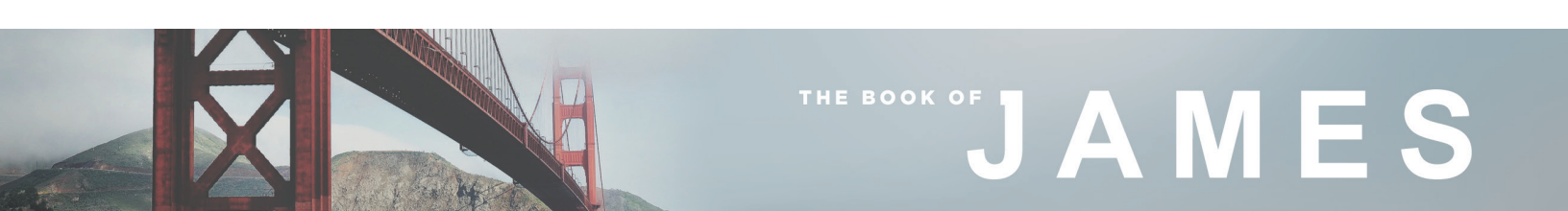
That's what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. How does it compare to what James says here in James 3?

When people set themselves up as sages or prophets, you need to look at their lives. What “fruit” are they bearing? Do their lives confirm the truth of what they're saying?

In James 3:16-17 we see descriptions of the “fruits” of true wisdom and false wisdom. What's the difference? How can we tell them apart?

What does it mean for wisdom to be “pure”?

How can wisdom be “open to reason”?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Peek at the Greek

The word the ESV translates as “open to reason” is from the Greek, *eupeithēs*. This word occurs only once in the New Testament. The literal translation means “easily persuaded,” but we shouldn’t read this as being a push-over or gullible. Instead, *eupeithēs* describes a person who is willing to listen to others and willing to defer to the wishes or desires of others. It is a disposition opposite of the “selfish ambition” (*eritheia*) in verse 16.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about the qualities of true wisdom by comparing with the Beatitudes. See Matthew 5:3–10.

Throughout the book of James there are many similarities to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

What qualities of true wisdom listed in James 3:17 are similar to the qualities of “blessed” people in Matthew 5:3–10?

Why do you think there are such similarities?

What do you think verse 18 means?

It might help, once again, to think about the people James is writing to, and those he is writing *about*. It seems that false teachers were causing division, saying hurtful things, claiming to be wise, but consumed by envy and ambition. Were they doing these things in the name of righteousness? That is, were they trying to promote some standard of righteousness by attacking everyone who didn’t play by their rules?

If so, then James might be telling them, “The only way to achieve righteousness is by making peace. If you really want to help people be more righteous, then be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Stop tearing people down and start building people up. Promote peace in the church, and we will grow in righteousness.”

What can you do to promote peace that yields “a harvest of righteousness”?

■ LAST WORD

As we go through the book of James, it’s hard to escape the idea that it was written to religious people. They considered themselves wise, and they boasted about that. They liked to be well-respected, and when they saw others who got more respect, they envied them, criticized them, and tried to get ahead of them. They must have had their ideas about how everyone else should live. And maybe this started with a genuine desire for righteousness, but this desire was soon clouded by impure motives, by personal ambition.

This description would fit the Pharisees of Jesus’ day (which may explain why there are so many parallels with the Sermon on the Mount). Apparently there were still these voices in the early church. And maybe we have some similar voices today—saying unkind, divisive things; driven by envy and ambition; sowing discord rather than peace.

If we were to name those people and criticize their spirit, we’d be dragged down into the same kind of conflict that James wants us to avoid. Let’s work for peace. But let’s not be drawn in by those who boldly claim that they are wiser than everyone else. Let’s be wary of impure motives. Be careful what you listen to.

James keeps the focus on true wisdom that comes from God. It is humble, caring, peaceful, quick to listen. Think once more about the wisest people you know. They probably don’t have all the answers, but they’re wise enough to go to God to get the answers. They’re probably so humble they wouldn’t call themselves wise. They’re probably patient enough to put up with all the fools around them without insults. This is what heavenly wisdom looks like.

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Prayer: James 1:5 invites us to ask God for wisdom. As Francis Chan suggested in the video, “Say, ‘God, I’ve been pursuing success, I’ve been pursuing riches, I’ve been pursuing knowledge but I see in Scripture now wisdom is what You value and it should be what I value...Give me the wisdom I need to navigate through this life in a way that honors You.’”

Memorization: Learn the Beatitudes from Matthew 5:3-10. Or at least create some mnemonic way to remember the eight qualities that Jesus describes there.

Study: Do a computer (or concordance) word search through the Bible for “wisdom” and/or “wise.” Pick ten verses from different books (not all from Proverbs!) and study them.

Honor: Do something to honor a person whose wisdom you have been blessed by. If the person is still living, thank them by telling them what they have taught you. If they have passed, then thank God for them, and find some way to commemorate their effect on your life.

Evaluation: Do this with a kind, humble heart. Name the 5 to 8 opinion leaders in your life—people in church, school, work, the media, etc.—whose ideas you regularly pay attention to. Based on the teaching in James 3:13-18, do you feel these people are speaking God’s wisdom into your life? This is not an invitation to pride, criticism, or a divisive spirit on your part—just a way to check your regular input with the descriptions of heavenly wisdom we learned today.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 8 JAMES 4:1-12

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

Have you ever had a humiliating, or at least humbling, experience that you've learned to laugh at now? Tell us about it.

How did you feel at the time?

READ

Read James 4:1-12

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 8: James 4:1-12 (10 minutes)

DISCUSS

Before we dig into the text, let's talk about that video. Why do you think they shot this part in the prison at Alcatraz?

Did it add a particular meaning or feeling to the things that Francis Chan was saying?

This is a violent, ugly, selfish section. It's not easy to hear. But it reminds us how dependent we are on the grace of God.

According to verse 1, where do fights and quarrels come from?

In the video, Francis said,

It's about this emptiness. It's about fulfillment in something other than God...passions waging war in you—like a frustration. Like, "I want this. I'm not fulfilled." And you've just got to get it...You never really ask God to fulfill you.

How do you feel about the word "murder" in verse 2? Does that surprise you? Do you think it belongs there? Were these people really killers?

Some scholars have suggested that it's just a misspelling in the Greek. Change one letter and it means "envy." But maybe James is a great speller, and he means exactly this. Let's look deeper.

In verses 2-4 there are three words that are also found in the Ten Commandments. Can you find them?

Peek at the Greek

The Greek words translated "murder" (*phoneuō*), "covet" (*zēloō*), and "adulterous" (*moichalis*) are the same words (or forms of the same words) found in the Ten Commandments in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint)—the version of the Bible that James' readers would have known.

Do you think this is intentional? Why would James want to tell his readers how they were breaking the Ten Commandments?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about commandment-breaking in the following Bible passages. Matthew 5:21-22, 27, Matthew 19:16-21; Romans 2:21-23; James 2:10-11

In Matthew 5, what new view of the commandments did Jesus give?

In Matthew 19, what did Jesus ask the young man to add to his commandment-keeping?

How do the statements in Romans 2 and James 2 match up? What are these two writers saying?

Remember that James' original readers were most likely of Jewish descent. They would have learned the Ten Commandments from childhood. Note also that James has been tracking along with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So maybe James is doing a Jesus-thing here. Jesus said it's not enough to avoid murder—avoid hate. Don't just abstain from adultery—abstain from lust. And if you're a young tycoon looking to buy eternal life, don't just keep the commandments—give to the poor. James is probably writing to Pharisee-like people who pride themselves on keeping the law, but they bad-mouth everyone who doesn't. James has already said that breaking one point of the law breaks them all. So the hatred they have is just like killing, and the desire they have is just like adultery, and their covetousness leads them to pray for things they shouldn't have. Their values are all messed up. James wants them to stop pretending they're good and instead humble themselves before God.

What do verses 2-3 tell us about the spiritual life of James's audience?

When they *did* ask God for things, what do you think they were asking for?

What can this teach us about prayer?

We often try to find formulas to figure out how prayer works. Let's see if we can take a different approach. The people on the receiving end of this epistle were (a) not asking God for what they wanted and, (b) when they asked, they asked with selfish motives. So we can assume that prayer wasn't an important part of their spiritual lives. They ignored God until they needed Him as a gofer. This is not what prayer is supposed to be.

So what *is* prayer supposed to be?

Is verse 4 saying that we shouldn't be friends with non-Christians? What is it saying?

GO DEEPER

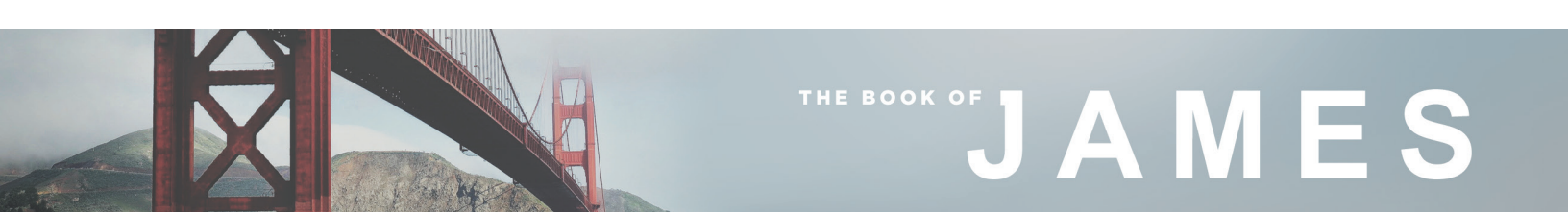
Learn more about friendship with the world in the following Bible passages. Matthew 6:24; John 14:16-17; 1 John 2:15-17; Romans 12:2

How would you define "world" as it appears in these verses?

If God loves the world (John 3:16), why shouldn't we (1 John 2:15)?

What sort of "transformation" (Romans 12:2) is required to keep us from thinking as the world does?

How do these verses enhance your understanding of James 4:4?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Verse 5 is just hard to figure out. Scholars have difficulty with it. It looks like a quotation, but no one can find it. And what does it mean? Who is “yearning” and what “spirit” is being referred to? (The word can mean either the Holy Spirit or the human spirit.) In context, it might mean something like this: “God longs for a loving relationship with us. In fact, He has put a spirit in us for the sole purpose of connecting with His Spirit. But we have strayed. We have been like an adulterous spouse, being more interested in the values of the world than in what God cares about.”

So just when we’re lined up for a smackdown from our holy God, what do we get in verse 6?

Francis painted the picture like this,

Maybe you’ve spent your life pursuing these other things and you’ve missed out on this relationship. [James] says well that’s OK. He’ll give you more grace. But at this point humble yourselves. Because God opposes the proud but He gives grace to the humble. So right now, quit being arrogant, defending why you were pursuing this, just humble yourselves. God will give you grace. Humble yourself. Don’t get arrogant.

Why? How can this happen?

What is our best response to this? How can we access God’s grace?

In the next few verses, there are nearly a dozen things we are told to do. What are they?

Leader: If you have a whiteboard, jot them down as people find them. Wherever necessary, ask, “What does this mean?” or “How can we do this?”

Can you find a common theme here?

GO DEEPER Learn more about our responses to God’s grace in the following Bible passages.
Proverbs 3:6 (NIV); 1 Peter 5:9; Hebrews 10:22; Psalm 24:3–6; Matthew 5:4; Joel 2:12–14;
Matthew 23:12

How do these verses help you understand the list of responses in James 4?

How can we “cleanse our hands” and “purify our hearts”?

Why should we turn “joy to gloom”? Is it wrong to be joyful?

How will God “exalt” us?

In verses 11–12, James gets back to the main charge he’s been making all along: These people are speaking badly. They are slandering others, judging them too harshly. Here he sounds a lot like Jesus in Matthew 7:1 and Paul in Romans 2:1. When you judge others, you condemn yourself. Leave the judging to God.

■ LAST WORD

Things are getting a bit clearer as we get deeper into the book of James. We’re learning more about the people James is writing to. They seem to consider themselves religious, and they’re proud of that. They even criticize others who are not as religious as they are. And yet, even in this act of judging others, they are revealing how far from God they themselves are. Every time they open their mouths, they’re slandering others. As a result, there are quarrels and fights. They seem more interested in building their own status than in loving their brothers and sisters.

Aren't you glad we're not like that?

Wait. Don't answer that. As soon as we say it's everyone else's problem and not ours, then it becomes our problem. The solution is not to argue better or to prove that we're right and others are wrong. The solution is to humble ourselves, to admit where we have fallen short, to pray for the things that God cares about, to mourn over our sinfulness, to receive God's grace.

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Humble Prayer: In biblical times they wore rough sackcloth and sprinkled ashes on themselves to come humbly before God. What could you do to show God (and remind yourself of) your humility? Kneel? Wear a dirty shirt? Put soil on your face? The specifics don't matter as much as your attitude. Take a good long time to listen to God. Ask about the things He cares about. Ask what He wants for you. Confess your sins and receive His forgiveness. Ask again for wisdom.

Memorization: Learn James 4:7-8.

Peacemaking: Are there "fights and quarrels" in your life? If you're not seeing eye to eye with someone, do what you can to set that relationship right.

Service: Find a humble way to serve your church or community. Clean up, fix up, help those who routinely get neglected. This is not about you getting props for a good deed, but about showing the love of God to others.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 9 JAMES 4:13–17

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

Did you ever have plans that got waylaid by a completely unforeseen circumstance?

How did you react to that interruption or ruination of your plans?

READ

Read James 4:13–17

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 9: James 4:13–17 (8 minutes)

DISCUSS

We all make plans. We have to or things would be a mess. I had to plan to lead this study today. You had to plan to be here. You have to plan to do a presentation for work or study to pass an exam. You have to plan to have someone pick up your kids from school activities if you can't do it. Making plans is not the problem James is talking about here. The problem is our attitude about the plans we make.

What attitude about our plans is James targeting here?

James talks about “arrogant schemes”. How would you define arrogance?

Do you think it is arrogant to declare your plans without first actually saying the words, “If the Lord wills”?

Some do this. It can get a little crazy when you visit a restaurant and tell the waiter, “If the Lord wills, I’ll have the chicken.” Or you get up to use the restroom and say, “Excuse me. If the Lord wills, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Is this really what James is talking about?

In the video, Francis said it’s about asking,

God, am I really in submission to your will? Am I comparing myself to other people who I consider more arrogant, that I’ve overlooked my own arrogance?...OK Lord, I recognize that my life is in your hand. Every breath is a gift from you. So I surrender it to you now. What do you want me to do?

What value do we get from reminding ourselves that our plans ultimately depend on God? Does that change what we do, or how we do it?

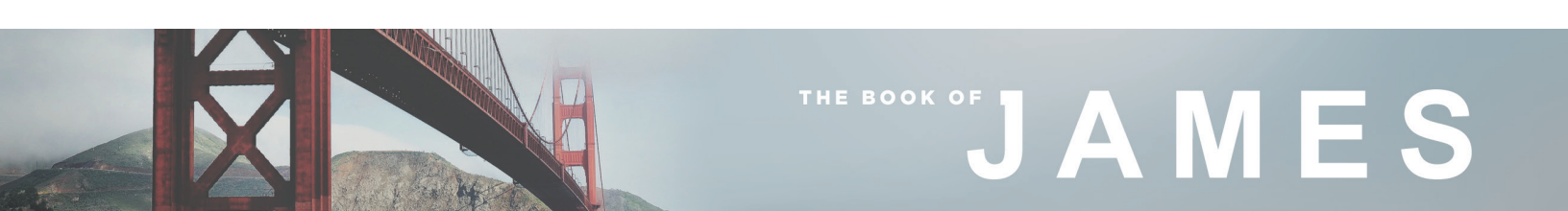
GO DEEPER

Learn more about planning for tomorrow in the following Bible verses. Proverbs 16:9; Jeremiah 29:11–13; Luke 12:22–26; Matthew 6:33–34

What do these verses say about our plans and God’s plans?

Next time your plans fall through, how might these verses help you?

Is there a way for us to make our plans more in line with God’s plans for us? How would you do that?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Is James saying we shouldn't make plans for the future? What's the point of making long-range plans if you don't know what tomorrow will bring?

The example James uses specifically refers to "business." Isn't it essential for businesses to do planning? How could a businessperson run a business according to this teaching from James?

Jesus Himself affirmed the value of planning (Luke 14:28-32). The key here is that God's plans trump our plans. We need to be humble enough to recognize that God might have different priorities from ours, and we should be obedient enough to make plans with His priorities in mind.

This is not necessarily bad business. One idea gaining traction these days in the business world is the "pivot." Successful businesses are those whose plans are flexible enough to deal with shifting realities of the marketplace. Changing course is often part of success. The same may be true in the personal lives of believers. God guides us today, and He may lead us to make certain plans, but we need to keep listening to him and be willing to "pivot" and follow new directions as He directs us.

Leader: *Use your judgment about drilling deeper into this point. The "pivot" idea could be very helpful for individual Christians and churches alike. One person might have felt called to missionary service and prepared to go, but then circumstances prevented it. Was the "call" misunderstood? Did the person slip out of God's will? Not necessarily. Maybe God wanted the preparation, but then a different type of service. Perhaps a church plans to launch a new ministry and bathes it with prayer, but then it fails. Did they not pray hard enough? Maybe not. God sometimes leads us in a zig-zag fashion. We need to follow His leading today and tomorrow, James would say, always willing to adjust our plans for next year.*

How does it make you feel to be compared to "a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes"? Does it make you feel insignificant, or does it encourage you to live in the now, or something else?

Francis said,

Think of a teakettle and the steam that comes up from it, he says that's you. We'll see you for one second, then you're gone. And here you are saying, "well here's what I'm going to do tomorrow, in fact here's where I'm going to go and I'm going to spend the next year there." And James is saying, "do you not understand, that is complete arrogance?"

Why do you think James uses that image?

GO DEEPER *Learn more about arrogance/boasting in the following Bible verses.*
1 Samuel 2:3; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Malachi 3:13-15; 1 Timothy 6:17

What do these verses add to James's teaching about arrogance and boasting?

How does God feel about human arrogance?

A few of these passages make a connection between arrogance and wealth. Why would those be connected? Is it easier for rich people to be arrogant before God? Why?

Verse 17 raises some questions. First, what does it mean? How would you put that in your own words?

Now what is it doing here? Does it go with the previous section about making plans? Or should it be put with the next chapter about rich people? (Note that the chapter divisions were not in the original text.)

How would the original readers of this epistle feel about what James says in verse 17?

Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You probably know it, but if you need a refresher, it's in Luke 10:30-37. A man is robbed and beaten, lying on the side of the road, half-dead.

Who comes by before the Samaritan does?

A priest and a Levite (a temple assistant). Let's think about what they did—and didn't do—in this situation. They were headed for Jerusalem, probably going to work. Their work in the Temple required them to be ritually clean. Touching a bloody body would put them out of action, out of work. That's what the rules said. And so they passed by without helping the man.

In the words of James 1:27, they kept themselves “unstained from the world.” They remained ritually clean. But did they do the right thing?

No, of course not. It was the Samaritan who helped, a man with nothing to lose, ritually speaking. He was already considered “polluted” by the religious elite. But it was he who did the right thing here.

As we've gone through James, we've seen a number of clues to indicate that his readers were Pharisee-like. They cared about religion, and yet they judged others, spewing hurtful words and causing division. They were proud, boastful, arrogant. And while they may have observed rules that kept them from certain sinful behaviors, they had a hard time helping the poor (James 2:15-16).

And so James might be telling them: “If you see a mugging victim on the side of the road and don't help, that's just as sinful as showing up at the Temple with bloody hands, maybe more so. You know you need to help the poor. Why aren't you doing it?”

■ LAST WORD

Sometimes we live as if God does not exist. We conduct our business day to day without thinking a lot about what God wants. We make our plans based on our hopes and dreams, not God's. We may have a rather moral code of conduct, but we're not responding to God's daily guidance.

That's a problem, says James. A few verses earlier he was urging his readers to “submit yourselves to God” and to “draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” That humble attitude of submission is crucial if we're going to live for Him in this world. Living in constant communication with Him is necessary if we're going to be flexible enough to change our plans based on His desires.

How do we need to change our habits so that we can hear God's daily guidance and follow it?

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Prayer: What plans do you have for your life, your family, your home, your business, your church? Talk with God about these, and then listen. What does He think about all this? If your plans involve others, get them in on the praying, too.

Chart: Look back through your life and choose 1 to 3 plans that you made long enough ago to see them develop. Then trace the development of those plans. Did things turn out as you wanted or expected? How did you interact with God through all of that? Did He lead in a certain way and then change directions? Map this process out as creatively as you can, and then examine that “map” of your life. What can you learn from that?

Seek counsel: As you consider plans for the future, find a wise Christian friend to consult with. Pray with them and ask their advice on determining the direction where God might be leading you.

Dare: Is there something God has been nudging you to do for Him that you've been resisting? Maybe you're worried about what people will think, or you might consider the action dangerous in some way. Keep tuning in to God's direction here. Get appropriate advice from others who are close to God, but then dare to do it—in the spirit of James 4:17.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 10 JAMES 5:1–6

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

What was the first job, outside your home, you ever got paid for?

How much did you get paid?

How did you feel about that wage at the time?

READ

Read James 5:1-6

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 10: James 5:1-6 (10 minutes)

DISCUSS

Leader: *This may be a challenging study, for several reasons. James addresses “rich people” directly and accuses them of exploitation and neglect. The people in your group will not want to think they’re included in the “rich people” category, no matter how wealthy they are. If you press the point, applying the Scripture to them, as you would with any Scripture, they might get defensive or even angry. And in today’s political climate, this might spark a debate about class warfare, taxation, welfare, and upcoming elections. You don’t want that to happen. So you might want to be extra careful about where the discussion goes. What is the Lord telling all of you through this Scripture? Do all you can to help people listen to God’s voice on this touchy matter.*

How would you describe the tone of this passage?

Who is James addressing in this section?

What is he predicting for them?

Why will this happen?

Do you think this is written to all “rich” people ever, to rich people in that time and place, or just to the rich people who were guilty of exploitation?

The deeper question is: *What are we going to do with this?* James really lays into these people, and it makes us uncomfortable. If we can dodge this barrage, we want to. We want to say it’s their problem, not ours. And most of us don’t think of ourselves as rich, do we? We’re always looking at someone else who has more, and we say, Go after them, James. *They’re* the problem.

But whenever we come to Scripture, we want to see what’s there for us. God wants to speak to us in these pages, and we need to be ready to listen, even if it’s uncomfortable. So maybe James is speaking to people who use their wealth badly, but there’s still a lesson here for us. How does God want us to use *our* resources? That’s the question we want to zero in on today.

GO DEEPER *Learn more about God's view of wealth in the following Bible passages.*
Proverbs 11:28; Jeremiah 22:13-17; Amos 6:1-7; Malachi 3:5

Jeremiah criticizes one king for his extravagant lifestyle and compares him with his father. How would you describe the two different ways of life in this passage?

As you look over all four texts, what corrections and warnings do you see?

What similarities do you see between these passages and James 5:1-6?

According to these passages, what sort of future does wealth lead to?

In James 5:1, what's the first thing James wants the "rich" people to do?

How do you think this compares with their current attitude? (Do they spend a lot of time "weeping and howling"?)

Why would this be important? What is there to weep about?

You might think James wants them to have some compassion, to weep for the plight of the needy. But this passage isn't about charity. He warns specifically about "the misery that is coming on you." This is not a rich-poor comparison as much as a present-future comparison. *Now* you are living in "luxury and self-indulgence," trusting in your wealth to shield you from the hard things in life, but you won't have that option in the future. You will have to face the consequences of your misdeeds.

We've seen earlier that James is connecting strongly with the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes it seems as if he is writing a commentary on that sermon. So let's take a look at a couple of things Jesus taught. The first comes from Luke's version of that same sermon.

Someone turn to Luke 6:22-26, and read it for us.

Who gets "blessed" here? Who has "woe" pronounced on them?

What comparison do you see here between the present and the future?

What connections do you see with James 5? Do you think James might have had this teaching in mind as he wrote his epistle?

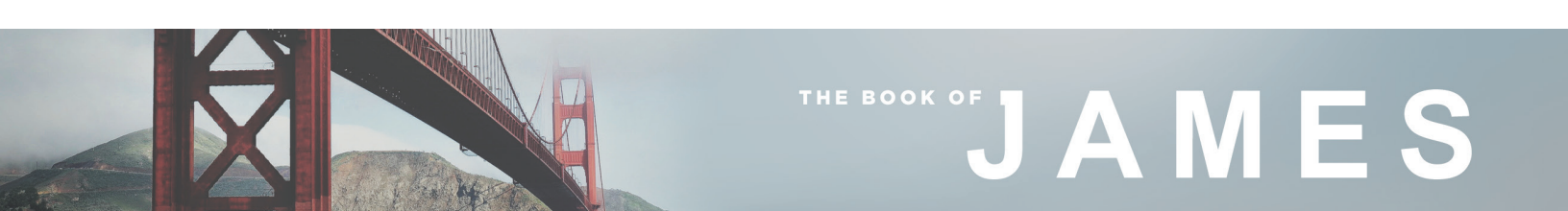
Someone turn to Matthew 6:19-21, and read it for us.

What connections do you see here with James 5?

Why is it important to "lay up treasures in heaven"?

What does this look like in our lives?

When James asks them to "weep and howl," he might also be asking them to weep in repentance for their wrongdoing. There is specific mention of cheating workers out of their pay. General issues of hoarding and self-indulgence are also listed. But there's also this strange comment in verse 6.



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Take another look at that. What do you think James is talking about?

Peek at the Greek

The ESV translation is a literal one: “You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.” The “righteous person” (*dikaion*) is singular, but it was a common literary device then (as now) for one person to stand for a whole class of people. A business leader today might say, “We want the employee to feel motivated,” meaning not just one, but all employees. And so some translations of James 5:6 put it in the plural. Righteous people are the victims, and that makes sense in context.

But there’s another tantalizing possibility. Could James be talking about Jesus? If any person could be called “the righteous one” (and other translations say “innocent one”), it would be Jesus. In fact, He is called exactly that in Acts 3:14. And Jesus did not resist his executioners, so that fits too. But why would James accuse his readers of killing Jesus?

Now we come back to the practical question of what we can do about this. We’ve been watching James tear apart these terrible rich people. Shame on them! But even if we might be richer than someone else, we really don’t think of ourselves as rich. Besides that, we don’t exploit people, and we certainly don’t kill them. So does this have any connection to us?

There are some questions we can ask of ourselves even if we’re not rich.

How can we use the resources we have, such as they are, to help the poor?

What can we do to make sure that poor workers are not exploited, that they get a fair wage for their work?

We know God loves justice and hates the exploitation of the poor. So as we participate in our world economy, how can we advance the cause of justice?

Where are we storing our treasure? How can we break free from the idolatry of money and all the things it buys? How can we seek first God’s kingdom?

In the video, Francis Chan got us off on the right track when he said,

Let’s get to the heart of the matter. If I’m constantly just thinking about acquiring stuff for myself, I’ve got to wonder, Is my heart really changed? I don’t genuinely really care about the needs of the world. If I really see myself as this mist, this vapor, that is here for a short time—man, is there something wrong with me and my heart if I’m not just content with knowing Jesus, knowing the Creator, and knowing someday he’s going to return...but instead I’m busy defending all the stuff I’m acquiring for myself? Let’s not argue about this object or that object and whether it’s right to get it. Let’s instead look at our hearts and go, Why long for these things so much? And, Why am I acquiring more and more for myself and neglecting those who are in need?

GO DEEPER *Learn more about what to do with wealth in the following Bible passages.*
1 Timothy 6:6-10; 1 Timothy 6:17-19

According to these passages, what attitudes should we have about wealth?

According to these passages, what actions should we take?

■ LAST WORD

Are the first six verses of James 5 written to us? Not exactly, but we can still learn some things here. We learn what God cares about, and we learn what makes Him mad. When rich people exploit poor people, that's a big problem. God will turn the tables in His coming kingdom.

And maybe we should “weep and howl” a little more about the injustice in our world. We should certainly do what we can to help the poor. James has been saying this all along.

But all of that starts in our hearts. We might find it hard to admit how important money really is in our lives. Is it more important to us than God is? How many of our decisions are based on the bottom line rather than our higher calling?

How can we break the mastery of money in our lives? How can we center our hearts on God rather than wealth? How can we store up treasures in heaven?

Leader: Let that discussion roll, as long as time allows. (You might have some practical ideas ready to suggest, in order to get it rolling.)

There's an interesting exchange in the gospels where Jesus announces it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. The disciples are flabbergasted. Rich people were the most religious people they knew. They ask, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus replies, “With God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:23–26).

You might think it's impossible to break the hold of money on your life, and maybe it is, for you. But with God, all things are possible.

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Review: Think back through the group discussions today. Were there any ideas that you could try out in the coming weeks?

Read: Isaiah 58. This chapter bears a lot of similarities to the book of James. People were religious, proud of their frequent fasting. But God challenges them to a new kind of devotion—caring for the needy, treating workers fairly, etc. Then that will open up a whole new kind of relationship with God.

Prayer of Confession and Commitment: Talk with God honestly and humbly about the role of money and possessions in your life.

Research: Find out more about exploitation in our world today. Share your findings with other believers. Pray together about what you could do to change things.

Budget: Examine your household budget. How do your expenditures reflect your *spiritual* priorities? What might need to change?

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 11 JAMES 5:7-12

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

What do you hate to wait for?

What waiting experiences have tested your patience?

Are there some things you feel have been worth waiting for?

READ

Read James 5:7-12

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 10: James 5:7-12 (8 minutes)

DISCUSS

James is talking a lot about patience (using the word four times in four verses). According to verse 7, what did people need to be patient about?

Remember that this was the first generation of Christians. When Jesus ascended to heaven, some surely expected Him to return in a week or a month. When the delay stretched on for years, some were losing hope—especially when life was getting more difficult for Christ-followers.

What analogy does James use in verse 7?

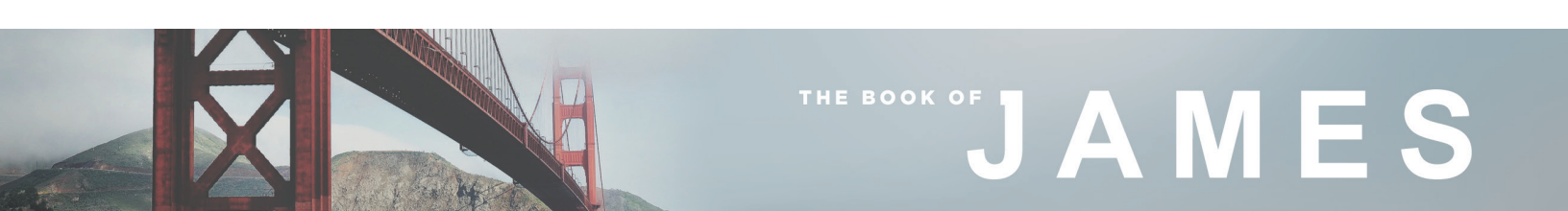
Have you ever planted a vegetable garden? How long does it seem to take from when you first plant the seeds to when you get to bring in the first ripe vegetable and cook it up?

How does this experience compare to waiting for Jesus' return?

Peek at the Greek

The word James uses for patience is *makrothumia*, which literally means something like “long-tempered.” You know what it’s like to be short-tempered, when any little thing can set you off. Patience is the opposite.

The word for “grumble” in verse 9 (*stenazō*) is used elsewhere for a similar situation. Paul talks about all creation “groaning” with us in anticipation of God’s final redemption and about our own “groaning” as we look forward to our heavenly home (Romans 8:22-3; 2 Corinthians 5:2,4). It’s the same word that’s translated “grumbling” in James. It’s a deep longing for a better future, but when we turn it “against one another,” it can become toxic.



THE BOOK OF JAMES

But these believers weren't just waiting, they were suffering. We know from history that there was growing opposition to the Jesus movement from Rome and from those Jews who did not follow Jesus.

James says in verse 11 that those who persevere through suffering are “blessed.” What does he mean by that?

How do you feel about that idea?

Flip back to James 1:2–4. Would someone read that for us?

How does that fill out your idea of the blessedness of suffering?

Here's what Francis Chan said about those verses in the first video of this series:

What God wants to do is not just to make you happy—he wants to make you holy. He wants you to be a reflection of him. And it's the trials, the sufferings, that make us more like Christ. He says he wants us mature, complete, not lacking in anything. Have you ever thought about that as the goal of your life?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about suffering in the following Bible verses.

2 Corinthians 4:7–10; Romans 5:3–5; 1 Peter 4:1–2; 1 Peter 4:12–13

What do these passages teach about suffering as a Christian?

What similarities do you see between Romans 5:3–5 and James 1:2–4? According to these verses, what are the benefits of suffering?

Does it help to think of our mortal bodies as “jars of clay”? What does Paul mean by that?

Peter suggests that suffering actually frees us from “human passions” (1 Peter 4:2). Why would that be?

What does it mean to “participate in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 4:13)? Do people who suffer get to know Christ better?

Have you ever heard suffering referred to as “the human condition”? What does that mean?

Is it true? Is suffering part of what it means to be human?

Suffering is such a common, but certainly not trivial, part of life that it's everywhere you look. There are all types of suffering in the world. The large-scale suffering of war and hunger and poverty and persecution, but also the personal suffering of the death of a loved one, having your heart broken, or having a life-altering disease.

What other types of suffering have you seen or even experienced?

The Bible is full of encouragement for those who suffer, whether that suffering is coming in the form of persecution or from some other force. We can even bring suffering upon ourselves. But Scripture keeps reminding us that God still cares, He has not abandoned us, that He sits with us in our suffering, and that we will come out of this stronger than before.

What encouragement does James give us here?

He provides two examples. First the “prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” Jeremiah is the best example of a prophet who suffered for speaking the truth. (Also, if you're counting up allusions to the Sermon on the Mount, here's another. Check out Matthew 5:11–12.) The second example is Job.

What do you know about Job?

GO DEEPER Learn more about Job in the following Bible verses.
Job 1:1; Job 1:8-12; Job 6:2-13; Job 42:10

*This Go Deeper section is a little different. It's an attempt to quickly get a sense for the story of Job. **Read Job 1:1 and 1:8-12.***

*Over the next few chapters, Job has all his livestock taken and his house blown down, killing his sons and daughters. His wife leaves him, urging him to “curse God and die.” But Job does not curse or blame God even when further bad things happen to him. He does, however, speak of his sufferings (often lamenting about them for chapters and chapters!). **Read Job 6:2-14 as an example.***

Finally, he enters into a lengthy debate with three friends about why all this is happening to him. They frequently insist he must have done something to deserve this. Job says he did not, but asks the very human question, “Why me?”

*In the end, Job may have moaned and wailed and asked “Why me?” but he did not turn against God or curse him. The end result of his all his perseverance is found in **Job 42:10.***

When people are discussing suffering, Job is the go-to Bible book. Why God allowed all of Job's suffering can be an unending debate. But James doesn't get into the why. He wants us to see Job and other prophets as examples of those who have been blessed as the end result of suffering.

GO DEEPER Learn more about yes, no and swearing in the following Bible verses.
Deuteronomy 23:21-22; Mathew 5:33-37; Colossians 4:6

“Swearing,” as James means it, isn't about using bad words, but good words. People would use elaborate vows to prove the truth of their words. While good Jews were careful not to use the holy Name of God, they might swear by heaven or angels or the Temple.

It seems that this swearing made a mockery of legitimate vow-keeping. What did Deuteronomy teach about making vows?

Compare James 5:12 to Jesus' statement on swearing in Matthew 5. What similarities do you see?

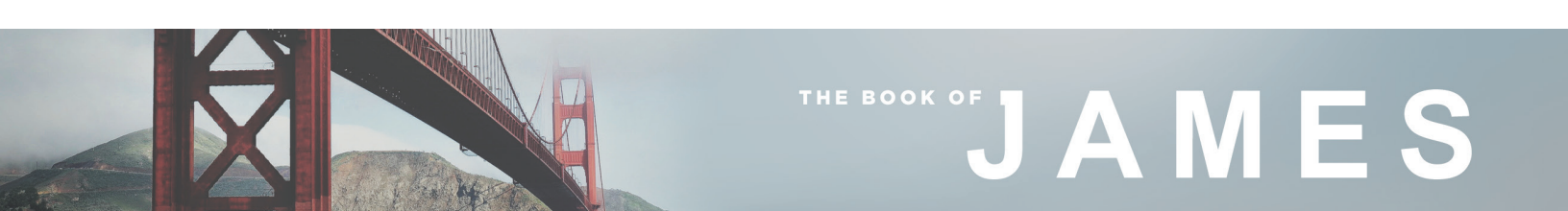
What is Jesus' main argument against such elaborate swearing?

So Jesus says, “Just be honest, Say yes or no and mean it.” There may be an underlying theme here. People were using religious language to impress others. They were showing off with their heightened expressions of what spiritual forces were vouching for their truthfulness. As Jesus (and James) emphasized, what's most important is the reality of your heart, not the show you put on for the rest of the world.

In Colossians 4:6, how does Paul describe the kind of conversation we should have?

■ LAST WORD

Countless books have been written about suffering. Sermons have been given, songs have been sung, and millions of dollars have been spent making movies about situations in which people suffer. And yet, there are no easy answers to the question of suffering because it often seems unfair.



THE BOOK OF JAMES

James doesn't get into the unfairness of it. He doesn't get into why suffering is allowed. What he seems to do is acknowledge that it's going to happen and says, "Here's what we can do with the suffering."

We can make sure it doesn't divide us ("don't grumble against one another").

We can trust that being patient, persevering, and riding it through till the end will result in our being blessed.

We can look to others in the past who have persevered, like the prophets and Job, as examples of those who have gone through profound suffering and come out on the other end. Because of Job's example, we can know that sometimes verbalizing the anguish and misery are part of going through it.

We can know that throughout suffering, God is always "full of compassion and mercy."

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Gut-Level Prayer: Sometimes when you're suffering, praying can be difficult—especially if you're trying to mind your manners with God and pray correctly. Remember that prayer is open and honest communication with God. Take Job's example and let God know just how miserable you are, just how angry, sad, scared, or confused you may be. Tell Him exactly how you feel. You aren't fooling Him by trying to keep a secret from Him.

Listening: Find out someone else's story. People become resilient through perseverance. When someone is going through a terrible time of suffering, it may seem like it's never going to end and hopelessness takes over. Even Job asked God to crush him and cut off his life so that his pain and misery would end. But Job persevered, and so have many, many people. Go to someone in your family, someone in your church, or someone else you know who has come through suffering. Ask to hear that person's story.

Sit with the Suffering: It's good to pray for those who are suffering, and you should pray for them. But, sometimes they need someone just to be there with them, to comfort them and let them talk and hold their hand. You don't have to have answers, especially to the question, "Why is this happening?" You can say, "I don't know, but I'm here for you."

Research and Support: In various parts of the world, Christians are suffering for their faith. Research their struggles. Pray for them. Connect with an organization that helps them.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

SESSION 12 JAMES 5:13–20

Quick Start



Read

Take some time in advance to read and consider the Bible Study questions and come up with personal examples to encourage discussion. Read through the Go Deeper sections and determine which ones you will use.



Print

Before class, make enough copies of this session's handout for your entire group. (The handouts came with your download.)



Watch

Make sure everyone can see the screen and the audio is at a comfortable level.

Note: For more detailed information, please see the Note to Leaders document.

OPEN

Have you ever had a prayer answered? I mean, where you prayed that something would happen and it happened? Tell us about it.

Looking back, was there anything special about the way you prayed that prayer?

How did you feel when it was answered?

Leader: *This is less casual than our usual opener, and you can take a little more time with it. Someone will probably say that sometimes God's answer is no, and that's true, but we're talking about times when you get what you pray for. This doesn't have to be a major mountain-moving. It could be a quieter, personal thing.*

READ

Read James 5:13–20.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 2: James 5:13–20 (10 minutes)

DISCUSS

How would you define prayer? What is it?

Are there certain ways we need to do it?

As children, many of us learned to bow our heads, close our eyes, and fold our hands—not a bad posture for prayer, but is it required? Some of us pray at certain times of day; many say grace before meals. Some recite the Lord's Prayer or follow it as an outline. Some seek places of quiet and solitude. Others pray while driving.

If prayer is, essentially, talking with God, then there must be many ways to do it. Certainly we want to speak respectfully to the Creator of the Universe, but that didn't stop Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, or other biblical heroes from speaking their minds. It's a conversation with a great God who loves us. With that in mind, choose whatever format makes sense.

James 5:13–14 seems to give us a menu: For different situations, here's what to do. Let's parse that out. What situations are mentioned?

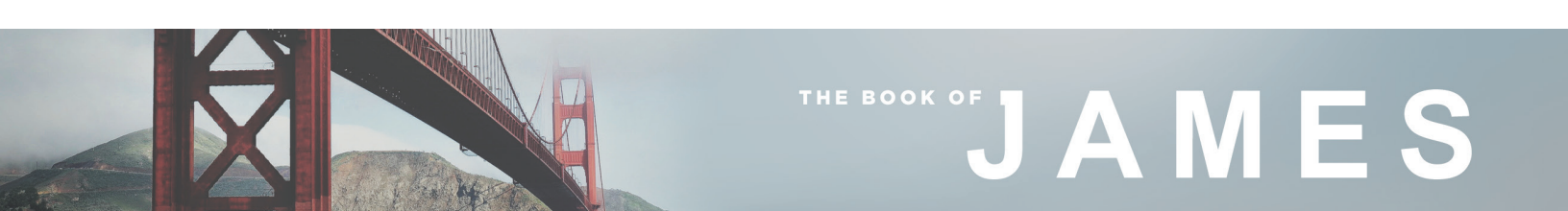
And what course of action is recommended for each one?

Let's say that all three courses of action are some form of prayer. How would these types of prayer differ from one another?

Why is it important to get the church leaders involved in prayer for a sick person?

In the video Francis paraphrased James this way,

He says get the elders. Get them to pray, because hopefully these are the righteous people in the church. And he says, there's a power in the prayers of the righteous. So gather them together and you could see a miracle right there—like actual healing!



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Is there more value in praying with other believers than in praying by yourself?

Scripture indicates great value in both personal prayer and group prayer, and both appear here in verses 13–14. If you're in trouble, pray. Call out to God privately when you need His help. But there is also healing power as the community of faith gathers, with its appropriate leadership, to call upon the Lord.

Is verse 15 telling us that every physical illness has a spiritual cause? What's the connection between sickness and sin?

Francis pointed out that there may sometimes be a connection, so we must be quick to confess. He said,

I know that when we've prayed for people as elders, we'll even give them time and say, "is there anything you need to confess before we anoint you with oil and pray for you?" Because we want to be pure before God...there are times in Scripture when people were sick because of their sin. That's not a law. That's not the way it always is—Jesus made that clear. But there have been other times where you know what, It's an opportunity to evaluate your life and confess if you've been living in rebellion.

GO DEEPER Learn more about sickness, sin, and prayer in the following Bible passages.
John 9:1–3; 1 Corinthians 11:29–30; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 7:21–22; Isaiah 38:1–5

What do these passages suggest about a connection between physical ailments and spiritual need?

Do you think sin really causes sickness, or was that just something people thought back in that pre-scientific age?

How did Jesus correct that notion in His disciples (John 9)? But then why would he forgive the paralytic first, before healing him (Mark 2)?

Why did Jesus heal people? Wouldn't it have been better to spend that time telling them about God?

How did King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38) model the teachings of James 5:13–14?

The connection between sin and sickness is not an easy one to figure out. Yes, many in the ancient world believed illness was the result of evil spirits. They didn't know about germs yet. And so Jesus' ministry was two-fold: healing people's diseases and casting out demons.

It's interesting, though, that modern health experts are finding that physical ailments often do have spiritual causes, or at least psychological causes. Guilt and stress and broken relationships can make us more susceptible to disease. So maybe there's a connection here after all.

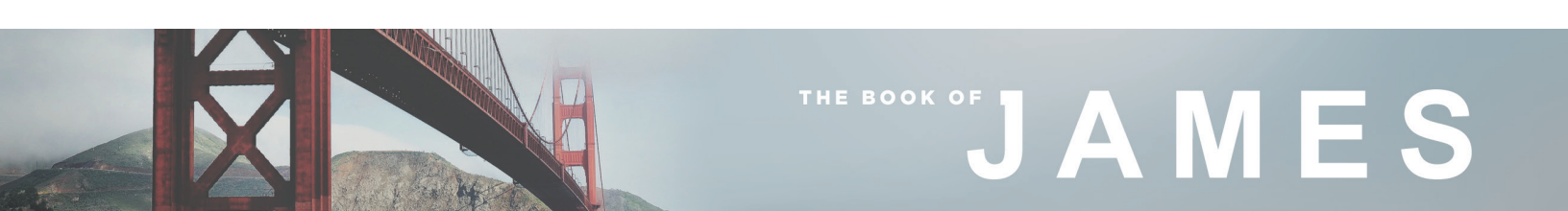
Does this mean that a sick person must have sinned in some way, to bring on the sickness?

No! Sometimes that *could* be the case, but not always. Scripture tells us of Hezekiah, who became ill and prayed successfully for healing, but there was no particular sin mentioned. In Philippians 2, Paul speaks highly of an associate who was seriously ill. Perhaps most famously, Job suffered boils on his skin, and his friends assumed that was punishment for some sin, but he was innocent. So don't blame a sick person for the sickness. It doesn't always have a spiritual cause.

But then why would James talk about forgiving a sick person's sins?

Note that James says *if* a sick person has sinned, they will be forgiven. It could be the problem, it isn't always.

Let me ask you, What do you say to God when you're sick? Is this a time when you ignore God, or pay more attention to Him?



THE BOOK OF JAMES

Sickness often brings about a spiritual crisis. We beg God for healing. We promise to live better lives. Yes, *we* even confess our sins. Somehow, we bring together the physical and spiritual in our own reactions. For many people, this can be a time of spiritual growth.

Do you think verse 15 guarantees healing if the people praying are faithful enough? Have you found this to be the case? Is every sick person healed when they're properly prayed for?

Of course our experience says otherwise. Some people assume then that they weren't good enough at praying. If they were truly faithful, they think, the healing would have happened. But that puts a lot of responsibility on us to sort of "earn" the healing, and it sort of ignores God's sovereignty.

There's a better way to think about this. Healing is both physical and spiritual. This passage mentions the forgiveness of sins along with the physical healing. The Lord may "raise up" someone physically or spiritually, perhaps ultimately in heaven. This isn't just an excuse we make when God doesn't do what we want. It's our way of understanding and submitting to what *He* wants.

The end of verse 16 has a sentence that many people know and often quote. "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." What do you think that means?

Do you think the original readers of this epistle would agree with this, or would it be a new idea for them?

If we're right about these readers being Pharisee-like—proud, judgmental, but religious—then they would completely agree with that, wouldn't they? Wouldn't see themselves as the "righteous" people who remain unpolluted by the world, and therefore their prayers are effective.

So let's ask the natural question: Who is righteous? Are we righteous? How do we become righteous? What distinguishes the righteous from the unrighteous?

We often read this verse something like this: *We must live good lives, so we'll be righteous enough to make God answer our prayers.*

But where does righteousness come from? From a relationship with God. We can't earn righteousness. We become righteous as God forgives our sins. So this verse is not about being good enough to get our prayers answered. It's about connecting with God. We recognize our unrighteousness, confess our sins, and are welcomed into a relationship with God, in which we pray for the things He wants.

Why do you think "confessing your sins to each other" is so important for healing and answered prayers?

The following verses use the example of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. How does James describe him?

It's interesting that he does not call Elijah "righteous." Maybe that was assumed, but the point James makes is that Elijah was a *human being*. He was just like us.

Peek at the Greek

In verse 17 James uses the word *homoioopathēs* to describe Elijah (the ESV translates as "with a nature like"). The first part of that word means similar and the last part (*pathos*) has to do with feelings or passion. So Elijah was a person who experienced similar feelings and circumstances to all of us. Barnabas and Paul used this same word in Lystra when the locals thought they were Greek Gods (Acts 14:15). "We also are men, of like nature with you..."

So, while Elijah was a highly respected prophet, it's important that we not make him superhuman. He shared our human nature. In fact, his story shows some pretty major mood swings. (Just compare 1 Kings 18 to 19.)

GO DEEPER

Learn more about prayer in the following Bible passages.

Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Matthew 6:5-16; Colossians 4:2-4

What do these verses teach about the content of prayer?

What do they teach about the manner of prayer?

What do they teach about the effect of prayer?

As you look at the last two verses of James, how do they connect to the rest of this chapter? Can you make any sense of it?

At first glance, the last two verses of James seem disconnected. He has been talking about prayer, and now suddenly it's about restoring an errant soul. Is this an afterthought, a sort of P.S. he appends to the letter? Maybe, but notice the kind of people he's talking about in this chapter.

In verse 1, he's scolding the rich people. But a few verses later he's talking about workers, and then sufferers, and then people "in trouble" and sick. Now he's talking about spiritual wanderers.

If we're right about the readers being like Pharisees—and take a glance at 4:11 to support that notion—how would they normally treat someone who "wanders from the truth"?

How does James's approach differ?

■ LAST WORD

Earlier James challenged his readers to humble themselves before the Lord. In this last part of his letter, he shows what that looks like. The church community is praying together, confessing their sins to one another. They accept the fact that they're "only human," but they still expect great things from God when they pray. And when someone strays from the faith, they don't alienate that person with harsh words of judgment. They pray. They forgive. They restore.

James has long had a reputation as a book of works. But there's a lot of grace coming through these pages. James will not stand for boasting. He opposes the judgmental spirit of his readers, with their harsh words. The Christian faith is not about setting up some ideal of perfect behavior, but of connecting with God humbly, listening to Him, letting Him reorder our priorities, and living out His passion for the needy.

Our faith in Christ changes us. We haven't experienced the life-changing power of the gospel if we confess that Jesus is Lord with our mouth, but live like we are our own Lord through our actions. A true faith, a living faith has the natural outworking of good works. And good works, no matter how good, can't produce authentic faith—faith is always a gift and never earned.

So as you face trials, as you experience temptation, as you minister to the needy, as you suffer, have faith in God. Trust Him for wisdom. Trust Him for compassion. Trust Him for patience. Trust Him for endurance. Trust Him for healing. Trust Him for the faith that produces a harvest of righteousness.

■ LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Prayer Journal: Begin keeping a prayer journal, in which you record the things you pray for. Plan to check back periodically to see how God is changing the situation, and how He's changing you.

Group Prayer: If you don't already do this, connect with other believers for group prayer. Talk with a few friends about getting together on a regular basis to pray for the needs of your church and community.

Care for the sick: Do you know anyone who's sick? How can you help them? Are there practical matters—errands to run—you could attend to? How could you encourage them? And don't neglect prayer—for and with the sick person.

Study Elijah: The character of Elijah is fascinating. Pick the story up in 1 Kings 17, and follow him until he gets swept up to heaven in 2 Kings 2. Do a name search to find other Bible passages that mention Elijah. Consider how his "passions" made him such an effective pray-er.

Connect with Wanderer: Do you know anyone who is wandering from the faith? What can you do to reach out to this person? Pray a lot before you do anything. Listen for God's direction. And remember all of James's cautions about the tongue. Don't spew harsh judgment, but express your love and concern.