



THE LETTER OF

JAMES

STUDY GUIDE

Introduction and context

James is one of the most-quoted books in the New Testament - phrases like 'quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger,' 'be doers of the word, not hearers only' and 'resist the devil and he will flee from you' are often used. But it also has some of the passages that Christians have struggled with the most in the New Testament. Does James hate anyone with money? And are our works more important to our salvation than God's grace in Jesus?

So it may be helpful to remember that the overarching theme of this letter is that real faith in Jesus leads to those good works he enables in us. The good news (or 'gospel'), as in the rest of the New Testament, is all about what Christ has done. But that gospel, when believed, makes life-changing impact on how we live, or at least it should!

We read in the letter that it comes from a man, simply described as 'James'. To be able to write without any further biographical details indicates that this James would have been well-known and that people would know who he was. That helpfully narrows down the list of potential authors to, realistically speaking, just one: James, the son of Mary and Joseph and therefore (half) brother of Jesus himself. He died in 62AD so that helps us place the letter earlier than that and some would say it was written before the council of Jerusalem in 48-49AD.

That makes it an earlier piece of writing than the Gospels, and most if not all of Paul's letters. It seems to be a general letter, rather than written to a specific church fellowship and that is helpful for us as it means that the application is likely to be more apparent for all Christians, although the context of the 1st century church and its unique situations are still important to consider. The themes such as money and favouritism, persevering through trials, taming our tongues - are clearly of relevance for all believers at all times.

We should pray and ask that the enduring relevance of God's living word would speak into each of our hearts. What does it look like today, tomorrow and all our days for faith in Christ to work itself out in our lives?

These notes mix questions of understanding the Bible with applying it to our lives. I hope you will then be able to use what the Lord is speaking through his word as the basis of your prayers for one another.

Sunday 1st September

James 1:1-8

Trials and Testing

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v1) How does James connect the scattered Church (Jew and Gentile believer) to the Old Testament people of God? Do you know that you are included and counted with Jesus?
2. (v2-3) Can we really have joy in trials? Does knowing that God brings good out of difficulties help us to have faith?
3. (v3-4) Can you look back and see how your faith has matured during the times you've had to persevere?
4. (v5) Why do you think James connects asking for wisdom with going through trials? Have you asked God for wisdom for how to use a difficult situation for good?
5. (v6) What is James trying to encourage amongst Christians as he says not to doubt?
6. Does James really mean that we should never doubt? Are there different kinds of doubts?
7. (v6-7) Here's the first time James is pretty blunt. How does his warning clarify how important it is to trust God?

Sunday 8th September

James 1:9-18

Perseverance

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v9) How radical is it to say that those in 'humble' circumstances are actually in the 'high positions' - does this remind you of anything Jesus said?
2. (v10-11). Ouch, sounds harsh. Again, does it remind you of anything Jesus said about camels and needles? Why might this be an important thing for those who are rich to hear?
3. (v12) This is almost a parable, so rather than a question - just ponder that promise in verse 12.
4. (v13-14) Is it reassuring that God would never tempt us to evil, and how does the Lord's prayer offer a way to pray against temptation?
5. (v15) Can we see how the path away from God tends to work? How important is it that we keep ourselves from our own particular temptations?
6. (v16-17) Instead of temptation, what do we get from God? What good and perfect gifts has God sent you?
7. (v18) And here is the greatest gift of all - new birth through the word of truth, so can we treat the word as a great gift?

Sunday 15th September

James 1:19-27

Hearers and Doers

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v19) Of those three things - listening, speaking, and getting angry - where are you quick and where are you slow?
2. (v20) It's hard to tell ourselves simply not to be angry. What can we fill our hearts with to reduce our temptation to anger?
3. (v21) Are you aware of ways that unhelpful and evil ideas can get to you? What will you do to rid yourself of them and replace them with the goodness of God's word?
4. (v22) Another good verse simply to think on and ask for the grace to put into practice!
5. (v23-24) Does James' mirror illustration help you see what a shame it is for a faith that is only theory and never practice?
6. (v25) What is the promise here of what we will find when we trust and obey?
7. (v26-27) Does our life of faith look like the picture of these verses? If not, or not enough, are we asking God for the grace to follow Jesus his way rather than ours?

Sunday 22nd September

James 2:1-13

No Favouritism

Questions for thought and discussion: 1. (2:1) Which types of people are you most tempted to show favouritism to?

2. (v2-4) How might this scenario play out in our culture? Are there attitudes in your heart that you need to repent of and ask for the grace to change?

3. (v5) Another reference back to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. Have a read of Matthew 5:1-12 and notice all the ways that James echoes Jesus' teaching.

4. Can you think of ways that the Church has continued to trip up on teaching like this? How could we be more faithful in putting it right?

5. (v8-11) How tempting is it to pick the bits of God's word we find agreeable, and find ways to ignore the other parts?! How do these verses keep us humble and reminded of our constant need for grace?

6. Do you agree with the idea that the church is 'people in need of grace helping people in need of grace'?

7. (v12-13) How important is it that we reflect Jesus' mercy towards people? Can we pray and ask that God would show us where we are acting as unmerciful judges over others?

Sunday 29th September

James 2:14-26

Faith and Deeds

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v14) This verse has been controversial, but only if James means we're saved by our deeds. Isn't this more about whether true faith changes the way we act?
2. (v15-16) How does this example cut to the heart of what it means to live like Jesus?
3. (v17) Ask God if there are areas of your life that need revitalising - how can we make sure that our actions match our faith?
4. (v18) How does James flip it around: is it ok to 'just' act kindly without also believing? Are we ever tempted to keep our faith in our heads, and not allow God to also use our speech and actions?
5. (v20-22) Can you think of times when what you believed had a positive impact on how you acted?
6. (v23-24) How would you sum up the point James is making in this section? What opportunities do we have, even in our current situation, for our faith in Jesus to determine how we live?
7. (v25-26) What did Rahab's action demonstrate about her faith? What would a stranger assume you believed if they saw a video replay of your week?

Sunday 13th October

James 3:1-12

Taming the Tongue

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (3:1) James acknowledges that we all slip up sometimes. How often do we find ourselves wishing to have said or not said certain things?!
2. (v3-4) Can you picture James' examples of the horse and the ship turned and manoeuvred by small things?
3. (v5-6) Perhaps today there are things you've said which you would like to receive forgiveness for? Or things others have said that you would like to receive healing and freedom from? Ask the Lord and receive.
4. (v7-8) Do you get James' point ... It is hard to tame the tongue? Would putting his advice on being 'slow to speak' be helpful for us in avoiding starting some of these 'fires'?
5. (v9-10) Could we do more of the praising in order to do less of the cursing?
6. (v11-12) James says this double standard should not be. Yet he knows we all slip up. Today is a good day for a double prayer - forgiveness for our failures and grace for more speech that builds, encourages and enables!
7. How would you summarise these 12 verses of chapter 3?

Sunday 20th October

James 3:13-18

Wisdom in Action

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v13) What does real wisdom look like to James? What would that look like in concrete ways in our daily lives?
2. (v14) bitter envy and selfish ambition will eat us up. Can we be honest with God and ask him to be at work in our hearts. Be specific and be honest, what are we harbouring that needs to be redeemed?
3. (v15-16) Can you think of examples of how envy and ambition in the world around us have led to disorder and evil practices? Could Christians play a bigger part in putting some of that right in the world? In our communities?
4. (v17) Have a read through this verse several times slowly and think about what each of those words means.
5. Are there aspects of that heavenly wisdom that you would love to have more of?
6. Verse 18 - Do you see that connection between wisdom and peace? Are there specific troubles in friendships, families, relationships and other situations that you could ask for wisdom on how to bring peace?
7. What are you going to take away from this section of James on wisdom?

Sunday 27th October

James 4

Submitting to God

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. Discuss how verses 2-3 speak to us about how we should live and how we should pray?
2. Verse 6 assures us of God's grace towards us. What part does humility play in receiving God's grace?
3. (v7) How can we resist the devil?
4. The first part of verse 8 is so reassuring. Maybe just dwell here for a moment and use it for prayer later.
5. (v11) What does "slandering one another" look like?
6. (v12) How do you feel about God being a judge?
7. (v12) Do you feel you struggle with judging others?
8. (13-14) Is it wrong to make (long-term) plans?
9. What do you make of verse 17? Can you think of any examples where 'verse 17' has been the case? There may be no need to share them, but to offer them up to the Lord.

Sunday 3rd November

James 5

Warnings, Encouragements, and Faith

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. James talks strongly about the “rich” in vv1-6. How do you feel about this? Is it justified given what he is saying?
2. Could you pray for God to show you afresh how he feels about the way you view money and possessions?
3. (v7) Why does James includes the picture of the farmer when talking about being patient?
4. (v8) What do you find most difficult about patience?
5. (v10-11) What has helped you when you have been through a season of prolonged suffering?
6. (v12) Discuss what you think this means for us today?
7. (v13) How do you find communicating with God in all circumstances?
8. (v14-15) What does James mean by “the prayer offered in faith”? How do we know if we have prayed “in faith”? Is it a feeling? If not, what is it?
9. (v15-16) Should we always expect instant healing? Is there a danger of never expecting instant healing?
10. (v17-18) How is Elijah an encouragement to us to pray?

Space for your notes, prayer reminders and all that the Lord may be saying to you as we read through this letter...