

Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

JAMES

Welcome to Source

Our Source

The Bible is unquestionably the most important book ever written. Not only does it speak to the issues we struggle with today (i.e., wealth, poverty, work, conflict, love, sex, forgiveness, guilt, sin, time, youth, death), but it also gives us a picture of a God who created the universe and who has been orchestrating an incredible story throughout history. While we recognize its importance, we often stay away from the Bible because it often seems unapproachable.

For these reasons, we have designed Source studies to help you engage with the Bible in a meaningful and helpful way. First, we've included an **Introduction** to each book so that from the beginning you have a clear picture of where the author is headed. Second, we've added **Notes**, which help make the ancient backgrounds of the text accessible and approachable. Third, and most important, we've created **Discussion** guides for each section of Scripture that allow you to explore and apply the passages in the context of community. These elements come together to form a very simple format for each week:

1. Before each session, read the selected passages in your Bible, look over the text notes, and answer the discussion questions.
2. Come to your small group prepared to share and discuss your responses.

James

Sometimes it can be an exercise trying to apply the Bible to your daily life. James, on the other hand, makes it perfectly clear for his readers by discussing real-life applications of the Christian faith throughout his letter. In this study, you will discover the wisdom behind living out your faith in practical ways.

Session 1 - James 1

Session 4 - James 4

Session 2 - James 2

Session 5 - James 5

Session 3 - James 3

Our hope is that this study will allow you to engage with the Bible in a way that incorporates the dynamics of a small group with the transformational nature of God's word.

James - Introduction

Jesus had several siblings; one of them was named James (not to be confused with two of Jesus's disciples who were also named James). Although initially skeptical about his brother, after Jesus's death and resurrection, James became a believer and an important leader of the church community in Jerusalem. He was respected for the advice he gave and for the wise decisions he helped the Christian community make. It appears that at one point, he decided to write down some words of instruction and send them to other Jewish believers who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. And though we cannot be sure of the exact date, *James the brother of Jesus may have written his work as early as AD 45*. We know this practical treatise on the Christian life as the book of James.

This book begins like a letter, but it's actually different from other letters of the time. It is a collection of short sayings, perhaps ones that James repeated often as he advised people. It also includes longer discussions of everyday issues that Jewish believers might face. James addresses these topics with the same techniques employed by speakers of the day. For example, sometimes he anticipates and answers a question someone might ask. Also, unlike most letters, this book does not treat its topics in logical or sequential order. Instead, it interweaves various themes as James raises subjects, leaves them, and then comes back to them again. *The conversational style, the short, pithy sayings and the interweaving of themes, all make this book similar to the "wisdom" writings found in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.*

Like those other wisdom books, the book of James concentrates primarily on questions of daily living. When James discusses what it means to be wise, he explains that wisdom is demonstrated in practical conduct: "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." The practical issues he considers include concern for the poor and underprivileged, the responsible use of wealth, control of speech, purity of life, unity within the Christian community, the nature of effective prayer, and above all patience and endurance during times of trial.

At the core of James's message is a discussion regarding faith: belief in who God is and what he has done ought to translate into acts of service and love. It was so with great men and women in the Old Testament, it's no different for those who follow Christ now. After all, James declares, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." The apostle Paul clearly taught that good deeds do not earn God's grace. But in this letter, James is addressing those who have already experienced this undeserved grace and who should, therefore, reflect that reality in their actions toward others. The people James encouraged faced many challenges as they sought to practice their faith in the circumstances of life. As we face similar challenges today, his godly wisdom remains as valuable as it was when he first shared it centuries ago.

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Session 1 - Notes on James 1

1:1

James was one of several brothers of Jesus and likely the oldest, since his name heads the list in Matthew 13:55. Along with his brothers, he was very skeptical about the claims that Jesus made (John 7:2-5). But at some point, he did come to believe that the boy he grew up with had come to save the world. He was one of the individuals who saw Jesus after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-7), something that likely marked him for life. He then became very influential in the early Christian movement, leading the church in Jerusalem with wisdom (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). James was martyred by stoning at the order of the high priest Ananias during the period after the death of the Roman governor, Festus, in AD 62 (Josephus, Antiquities 20.9).

This letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations,” likely a reference to Jewish Christians who had to leave Jerusalem because of the persecution against Christians after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1; 11:19).

1:2

After a brief introduction, James begins by encouraging his readers to persevere under trials, something he knew they were struggling with. Interestingly, the same Greek root lies behind the word “trials” here and the word “tempted” in 1:13. Here the emphasis is on trials that come from the outside, such as persecution, poverty, sickness, and others (“many kinds”). While in verse 13 the emphasis is on inner trials, such as the temptation to sin, James knows that perseverance under both circumstances leads to the building of one’s faith.

1:5-8

A common theme in Jewish wisdom texts (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) was that all wisdom came from God (Proverbs 2:6; 9:10), and that this wisdom was available for all who would seek it (Proverbs 1). James adds that this isn’t a quest merely for knowledge for its own sake, but a commitment to obeying what God revealed. The imagery of the sea here is not one of giant

waves crashing down on the rocks. Rather, it is of a wavy horizon that changes shape and texture moment by moment, changing its course according to the wind. You could not ask for God's wisdom one day and then pursue the world's wisdom the next day.

1:9-11

Picking up from his thoughts on trials and wisdom, James continues with a biblical perspective on wealth meant to comfort those of lower means. Regardless of one's economic status, James stresses that riches will fade and that the important thing is to view wealth, or the lack of it, from God's perspective.

1:12

As a reward for enduring trials, James writes of a "crown," which normally referred to a wreath placed on the head of a victorious athlete. In this case, it represents the reward of eternal life.

1:13-15

James now focuses on persevering during inner trials and temptations to sin. Although there are several instances in the Old Testament when God tested his servants' faithfulness (Genesis 22:1; Deuteronomy 8:2; 13:3; Judges 2:22), James makes it clear that God does not tempt his people to sin. Rather, when we sin, it is due to our own inability to stay away from its alluring enticement. Unfortunately the result of our giving in to temptation is the oft-repeated cycle of desire, sin, and death illustrated by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:6-22), King David with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-17), and the imagery of the "adulterous woman" from Proverbs 7.

1:16-18

To clarify, James insists that God is not the author of evil desires or sin, but of good things, including creation ("heavenly lights," indicating the sun, moon, and stars) and rebirth (eternal life that we receive upon believing the "word of truth," or the gospel). Truly all that is good comes from God.

1:19-21

James now turns his attention to the words that we use and the attitudes behind them. After urging us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, he commands us to “get rid of all moral filth.” The verb translated “get rid of” is often used in reference to taking off clothes. The phrase “moral filth” continues this picture, as the same root word is used in 2:2 to describe the clothes of a poor person, “filthy old clothes.” The picture is one of taking off the filthy, dirty rags that characterize the ways of this world, and then accepting the life-giving word of God that has the power to save us from a life not worth living. What James has in mind is a total, life-changing transformation.

1:22-25

We should not only be quick to listen (v. 19), but also quick to apply the truth of God in our lives. This same point was emphasized by Jesus in his parable of the wise builder (Matthew 7:24-27). The “perfect law” refers to the Old Testament law of Moses that had now been fulfilled and perfected by the person of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17).

1:26-27

James previews three ways in which his readers can be doers of the word: control the tongue, look after the socially powerless, and avoid worldliness. And while there are other aspects of religion the Bible touches upon, a genuine religious experience will incorporate these types of deeds. As John Calvin writes, “James does not define generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without the things he mentions is nothing” (Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles).

Session 1 - Discussion

Introduction

Life isn't easy. We've all faced trials and temptations that have come into our lives and struggled with how to deal with them. As well, we've all struggled to be consistent in applying the teachings of Christianity into our lives. In this first section, we'll look at these two themes: facing trials and practicing obedience.

Discussion Questions

1. Read James 1:1-2. Life is full of trials, temptations, and suffering. How have the trials that you have experienced brought you closer to (or pushed you further away) from God?
2. What are the external trials and pressures that you are currently facing? How are they affecting your faith?
3. Read James 1:13-15. What are the internal temptations that pull you off course? How can we avoid the path of self-destruction that these lead us down?
4. Read James 1:22. How do Christians deceive themselves when they only listen to the truth, and don't put it into practice?
5. How can we be better at applying the truths that we are exposed to?
6. What is one truth that you need to apply to your life, but haven't yet?

Think About It

How would you describe your relationship with God? Is it merely a religious practice in which you go through the motions, but experience no significant life change—the kind of relationship that withers under trials and temptations? Or do you have an active, growing faith that enables you to meet trials and temptations with continued obedience?

What Will You Do?

James mentions three ways that we can be doers of the word: controlling your tongue, looking out for the socially powerless, and avoiding the ways of the world. How will you put one of these into practice this week?

Changing Your Mind

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

Session 2 - Notes on James 2

2:1-4

Discrimination must have been an issue facing James's readers given the amount of attention he gives to this problem. As was the case throughout Palestine, the rich were oppressing the poor, as well as receiving preferential treatment.

2:1

The Greek word translated "favoritism" literally meant "receiving the face." To "receive the face" means to make judgments about people based on their external appearances (Moo, 102).

2:2

James now offers a hypothetical example of favoritism for his Jewish readers—two different people come to the meeting, one wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and the other wearing shabby rags. In that day, gold rings distinguished the upper-level senatorial classes and were a symbol of wealth and status. On the other hand, James's use of "filthy old clothes" would have conjured up the image of a homeless person in our day, someone wearing dirty, mismatched, and smelly clothes.

2:3-4

The situation seems to be clear: Christians are showing partiality to the rich, while showing disdain to the poor. Moreover, the phrase "among yourselves" carries a nuance of "in yourselves." James makes clear that the outward division being made between the rich and the poor reflects an inward division of a heart wavering between God and the world. As one scholar writes, "Consistently Christian conduct comes only from a consistently Christian heart and mind" (Moo, 104).

2:5-7

Having warned against favoritism, James now explains why it is wrong. Since God does not judge based on a person's material wealth, neither should his followers. In fact, God emphasizes showing compassion to the socially oppressed (Leviticus 23:22; 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 15:11; Galatians 2:10) and he delights "to shower his grace on those whom the world has discarded and on those who are most keenly aware of their own inadequacy" (Moo, 108). And if this weren't enough, James points out in vv. 6b-7 that favoritism doesn't make any sense—why would you show partiality to those who oppress you?

2:8-11

James now offers another reason why favoritism is prohibited. To reject any part of the royal law, which at its heart consists of "love your neighbor as yourself," meant that you rejected the whole law, and thus God's authority. James's argument draws support from Leviticus 19:15-18, where God addresses partiality and the law of love. He then uses two of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13-14) that deal with loving your neighbor to illustrate his point.

2:12-13

James now urges his listeners to put what he has been talking about (don't show favoritism) into practice by reminding them that they will be judged. As believers, they have been forgiven of all their sins through their faith in Christ, and yet there will come a time when they will give an account for their actions (2 Corinthians 5:10).

2:14-26

This section of the letter is the most theologically dense, as well as the most contested. Most disagreements develop as a result of trying to set James's emphasis on deeds against Paul's emphasis on faith in the process of salvation. However, a safe approach to handling this passage (and Paul's later passages in his epistles) is to see this through James's ongoing caution against not "doing the word" rather than as a corrective to Paul's theology. Using Martin Luther's words, people are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

2:14

James begins with the question, “Can such faith save them?” The implied answer is “no.” James is not asking if faith is a basic element of salvation. Instead, he is asking if faith that has no outward expression is real biblical faith at all.

2:17

As James continues his case, he announces the main point he’s trying to make: Faith by itself . . . is dead (v. 17). Faith without deeds is useless (v. 20). Faith without deeds is dead (v. 26) (Moo, 119).

2:18-19

James then introduces an imaginary partner with whom he can dialogue in order to make his point. This is an ancient literary device known as diatribe. In response to the partner’s emphasis on making a distinction between faith and deeds, James suggests that neither faith nor deeds is optional in the Christian life. Rather, the two always go together.

2:21-24

James insists that deeds are an expression of genuine faith, not required for salvation. He quotes Genesis 15:6, “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it (i.e., faith, not works) to him as righteousness.” Then in Genesis 22, his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac serves as proof of his faith. Later he points out the deeds of Rahab (Joshua 2) as another example of faith expressed through action.

2:24

A close examination between this verse and Romans 3:28 helps clarify the tension between James’s and Paul’s statements on justification:

James 2:24 - People are justified by what they do and not by faith alone.

Romans 3:28 - A person is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

James attacks the idea of “faith alone.” Here, he refers to the faith he has been denouncing throughout his letter: faith that is useless or dead. Emphatically, Paul would be in accord

with James’s suggestion that real faith is faith that is expressed in obedience (Romans 1:5). However, the main tension comes from the use of “justified”: Is there any place for works in the process of justification? The resolution of this tension comes when we recognize that James and Paul use “justify” differently. While Paul refers to justification as the initial declaration of a sinner’s innocence before God, James refers to justification as the ultimate verdict of a person’s innocence at the last judgment (Moo, 141-142). The theologian John Calvin states, “. . . as Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous” (*Institutes* 3.27.2).

Session 2 - Discussion

Introduction

Whether it's a failure to show compassion or a neglect of those who aren't rich and influential, we are a poor representation of God when our faith is not accompanied by action. At the heart of the letter James wrote is this call for a living faith, a faith that is expressed through an active life of love and deeds.

Discussion Questions

1. Read James 2:1. Where do you see examples of favoritism being shown? When have you been the recipient of favoritism based on your appearance or social status? (You can give an example of a time when you were looked upon favorably or unfavorably.)
2. Why are the rich and powerful given preferential treatment in the world? Why should we avoid showing favoritism based on status or wealth?
3. As you examine your life, in what areas are you showing favoritism toward some while neglecting those who may also need your attention?
4. James's words about favoritism lead to the larger issue of putting one's faith into practice. Read James 2:14. How do you respond to people who claim to be Christians, but lack any deeds to back up their faith? How do you respond to those who seem to perform many good deeds but don't have any faith?
5. Biblical scholars have long-debated James's apparent emphasis on deeds (James 2:20) with Paul's emphasis on faith (Romans 3:28). What is the connection between faith and deeds?
6. How is your faith being expressed through deeds? How does your faith affect the choices you make and the things you do?

Think About It

Think of someone God has put in your life who may be unattractive or seems to have very little to offer you. Have you been guilty of neglecting this person? What difference would it make if you were to see this person through God's eyes?

What Will You Do?

What can you do this week to express your faith through action? Specifically, what can you do for someone in your life whom you normally ignore or neglect?

Changing Your Mind

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)

Session 3 - Notes on James 3

3:1

James turns his attention to a particular example of true faith: the use of the tongue. Although this passage begins by addressing those in teaching positions (who will be held more accountable because they have greater influence), verses 1 and 2 serve as a launching point for a general warning directed to all his readers about the tongue.

3:2

The words we speak are a reflection of what is in our hearts (Matthew 12:34-37; 15:18-19). The wisdom writers recognized this connection between our speech and our character (Proverbs 10:11; 11:9; 12:18; 18:6-7), and James begins by emphasizing this connection.

3:3-6

After introducing the caution to teachers, James offers several metaphors to illuminate the power of the tongue. The imagery of horses and ships would have been a familiar illustration for James's readers. In fact, these images were commonly used by Greek philosophers, including Aristotle, Philo, and Plutarch. As was a common warning during that period, James argues the idea that small things can influence big things.

3:5

Another traditional method of illustrating the power of the tongue was to compare it to a fire. Though forests were not common in Israel, brush covered many of the hills and in that dry climate could burst into flames with disastrous results. Interestingly, James uses the Greek word *helikos*, which is translated as both "great" and "small." It's used to denote magnitude in either direction. Again, James creatively draws attention to the idea that small things can tremendously affect big things (Moo, 155).

3:6

James identifies the source of the destructive potential of the tongue as “hell.” In the original language, the reference is to a literal valley outside of Jerusalem, the Valley of Hinnom. It had an evil reputation as a place of pagan child sacrifices (Jeremiah 32:35), and it was often used for burning trash. Jesus used this valley to refer to the place of eternal condemnation. Here James connects hell, and the one who rules over hell, Satan, as the power that sets fire to destructive words.

3:9

Because humans were made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27), to curse a human being was to show contempt for God.

3:10-12

As fig trees can’t produce olives and a grapevine can’t produce figs, destructive speech cannot come out of a heart totally devoted to God. Our destructive words are not simply a slip of the tongue, but rather an indication that our hearts are divided.

3:13-18

James now turns his attention to the topic of wisdom, setting forth to explain what true wisdom is. While it is tempting to think of wisdom as only intellectual ability or superior knowledge (as many Greeks did, see 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:6), for James and the writers of the Old Testament wisdom books, true wisdom was much more holistic. True wisdom began with a respect for God (Proverbs 1:7), led to the discernment of what is “right and just” (Proverbs 2:9), and enabled one to “walk in the ways of the just and keep to the paths of the righteous” (Proverbs 2:20). It involved reverence for God, clear insight, and unwavering action. James challenges the community to display true wisdom through their actions.

3:14-16

He then sets forth a contrast between two types of wisdom: “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” wisdom and “wisdom that comes from heaven.” The use of “earthly” emphasizes that this false wisdom is limited and narrow in its scope. It is wisdom as man understands things from his finite, earthbound perspective. It is not a wisdom that accounts for God’s heavenly perspective. The Greek word for “unspiritual” is related to the word for “soul.” It refers to wisdom that is tied to our emotions and our reasoning. Again it highlights how limited this false wisdom is, tied as it is to human reasoning in contrast to godly reasoning. So James uses a progression of qualifications, concluding with the emphatic “demonic” to describe wisdom that has its source from the deception of demons.

3:17

In contrast to the “wisdom” that James has been describing in the previous verses, here he outlines the characteristics of true wisdom that comes from heaven. Concurrent with his larger theme of faith expressed in deeds, true wisdom is identified by the quality of life that it produces. This is in contrast to the fruit of false wisdom, which produces selfish ambition, envy, and disorder.

3:18

Gifted with true wisdom from above that produces peace, this verse provides a clear connection with what follows in chapter four.

Session 3 - Discussion

Introduction

How many times have you wished you could take something back that you've said? It isn't very hard to come up with inappropriate comments, tactless remarks, or intentional jabs that we regret. And while it may be tempting to write these off as "slips of the tongue," they point to a bigger problem. In this session, we'll discuss the power of our tongues (3:1-12) and the characteristics of wisdom (3:13-18) as we seek to align our actions with our faith commitments.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most encouraging thing someone has said to you lately? What effect did these words have on you?
2. When have you witnessed the destructive power of words? What effect did these words have?
3. Read James 3:9-12. Why is it so important that we watch what we say? What do our words say about us?
4. Read James 3:13. Who is the wisest person you know? How does he or she demonstrate wisdom?
5. Read James 3:14-18. When have you followed earthly wisdom? What path did that take you down? When have you followed godly wisdom? What path did that take you down?
6. What is an area in your life in which you need to demonstrate more of God's wisdom?

Think About It

Which of the fruits of true wisdom do you see in your life (v. 17)? Which of the fruits of true wisdom are not evident?

What Will You Do?

This week, how can you be intentional about the words that come out of your mouth?

Changing Your Mind

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. (James 3:17)

Session 4 - Notes on James 4

4:1

This verse picks up the discussion of wisdom from the previous chapter, continuing with a similar question as in 3:13. In this question, the Greek words translated as “fights” (*polemos*) and “quarrels” (*machai*) could refer to both physical acts of violence, as well as verbal strife. It is likely that James is referring to the harsh words, criticism, and slander that too often accompany disputes (Moo, 180).

4:2

It is not likely those in the community were actually killing each other to get what they wanted. Rather, with his harsh language, James is suggesting that if envy goes unchecked, it can eventually lead to murder. The Old Testament contains several examples of this, from Ahab’s murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-16) to David’s murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 11).

4:3

At the source of the quarrels and fights is frustrated desire. There are members in the community who don’t have the things that they long for, and now James gets to the point of why they have not received them. God will grant us the true desires of our hearts, which he has placed in us and will bring us the most joy. After all, he is the one who has given us all good things (1:17) and will freely grant us wisdom if we would but ask (1:5). Jesus similarly promises that we will receive what we ask for (Matthew 7:7). But why would God richly bless us in order for us to spend it all on our self-serving desires?

4:4

James begins a new train of thought by calling those in the community to repent. As he does so, he draws heavily on Old Testament prophetic writings that often expressed this theme. For example, in the Old Testament, Israel was often called an adulteress for

claiming to serve God while pursuing foreign idols (Jeremiah 3:20). James now levels this charge of spiritual adultery against those in the church who have turned away from God in order to chase after selfish desires.

4:5

This is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to translate. Because of the sentence structure and grammar, interpreters are divided as to whether James is referring to (1) God's jealousy for his people, or (2) to the human tendency to be envious:

(1) “. . . he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us.” (TNIV)

(2) “. . . that the spirit he caused to dwell in us envies intensely.” (NIV)

In light of the context, it seems best to interpret this verse as referring to God's jealousy, since it comes directly after James's warnings about flirting with worldly attitudes and values. As such, when James refers to Scripture, he likely has in mind the theme of God's jealousy for his people that runs through the Old Testament (Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Zechariah 8:2).

4:6

Since God's demands in accordance with his jealousy would be too great for us on our own, he supplies us with grace. As Augustine has said, “God gives what he demands.” But God's grace must also lead to humility (Proverbs 3:34)—which becomes the dominant theme in verses 7-10.

4:7-10

James gives ten commands, each of which is so stated in Greek that it calls for immediate action in rooting out the sinful attitude of pride (Barker, 2079).

4:8

The Old Testament temple tradition called for priests to observe “washing” and “purifying” rituals before standing before the Lord (Exodus 30:17-21). Psalm 24:4 mentions “clean hands and a pure heart,” indicating both deeds and disposition.

4:9

While there is nothing evil in laughter and joy, James speaks of the caricature of laughter that is often associated with foolish living in the Old Testament (Proverbs 10:23; Ecclesiastes 7:6), as well as joy found in the indulgence of sin rather than in the life-giving grace of God. A cavalier, “devil-may-care” attitude toward sin ignores the seriousness of a breach in our relationship with our heavenly Father. James calls the community to soberly consider the ramifications of their choices.

4:10

When we acknowledge our desperate need for God and submit to his will for our lives, then he will lift us up (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 1 Peter 5:6).

4:11-12

James now addresses how we judge each other each time we speak critically. When those in the community were using the law to judge others, they were, in fact, judging themselves. Because in slandering one another, they were guilty of breaking the law. The law specifically stated, “Do not go about spreading slander among your people” (Leviticus 19:16). Moreover, when speaking of judging and law, there is only one who is the ultimate judge, God himself. We have no right to slander or speak against our neighbors. Our responsibility is to keep the royal law of love (James 2:8).

4:13-17

James now turns his attention to merchants who were arrogantly seeking wealth and leaving God out of their calculations. He begins by reminding them how unpredictable and fleeting our lives are (Proverbs 27:1), and then he urges them to acknowledge that their lives are ultimately under God’s direction. “If it is the Lord’s will” is patterned after the Lord’s prayer (Matthew 6:10) and was a common sentiment of Christians (Acts 18:21; 21:14). James then concludes with an admonition to the wealthy to do good while they have the chance. Since their lives and fortunes are so fleeting, they’ll never know if they’ll have the same opportunity again (Proverbs 3:28).

Session 4 - Discussion

Introduction

We've all had times in our lives when we've been so focused on something that everything else suffered as a result. We just had to get into that college, have that house, land that job, or pursue that relationship. The result of this pursuit was conflict with the people in our lives and distance from God. We all get off track, and James's audience is no different. But God is always there waiting to welcome us back, if we would just humble ourselves before him.

Discussion Questions

1. When was the last time you were in a serious fight or quarrel with another person? What caused the conflict? Was there anything you could have done to prevent it?
2. Read James 4:1-3. What are the selfish desires that capture your attention? When you allow yourself to chase after these, how does it affect your relationships?
3. Read James 4:4-5. What are the things that compete for your allegiance to God? How does it make you feel to know that God is jealous for you? How can you keep God first?
4. Read James 4:6-10. Humility is crucial in our relationship with God, especially when we are coming back to him after going our own way. When have you humbled yourself before God? How does he lift up those who humble themselves before him?
5. Read James 4:11-12. In what situations are you tempted to be critical of others? Why must we strive not to judge others?
6. Read James 4:13-17. How can you remind yourself of the temporary and fleeting nature of life? What is an area of your life where you need to say, "Your will be done"?

Think About It

“You do not have because you do not ask God.” God invites us to ask him for the things that our hearts long for. What is one desire of your heart that you would ask God for? How have you been pursuing this desire apart from God? What would it look like for you to trust God with this?

What Will You Do?

“So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don’t do it, you sin.” Where do you have an opportunity to do good this week?

Changing Your Mind

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:10)

Session 5 - Notes on James 5

5:1-6

Continuing with his warning to those who use their wealth to suit their own purposes, James now turns his attention to wealthy, non-Christian landowners. In doing so, James follows a familiar pattern from the Old Testament where writers would declare judgment on godless nations right alongside exhortations that were intended for God's people (Isaiah 13-23; Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32).

5:2-3

James begins this pronouncement of judgment by condemning the hoarding of wealth. He informs the wealthy that their treasure is certain to fade away (Matthew 6:19; Luke 12:33), and indeed it is already rotting before their very eyes. This corrosion testifies against them—by having so much that it wastes away from disuse is a sign of their hoarding and a prelude of their judgment. In light of the fact that we are in the last stage of history, eagerly awaiting Christ's return and the issuing in of a new age (5:8), their hoarding is all the more vain and pointless.

5:4-6

Since withholding money meant that the day laborers would likely not be able to pay for food for themselves or their families, Old Testament law forbade landlords from withholding payment (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Even though the rich landowners seemed to be getting away with such exploitation, they need not be fooled, as God would hear the cries of the oppressed. His judgment of them was coming. James underscores this with the picture in v. 5 of the rich being fattened like cattle for the day of their slaughter, totally unaware of their looming destruction.

5:7-12

After delivering a severe warning to rich oppressors (possibly for the benefit of the Christians who would be comforted by the assurance of God's vindication), James turns his focus to directly address those who were oppressed and to encourage them to resist resentment and retaliation as they waited on "the Lord's coming." The Greek word translated "coming" is *parousia* and basically means "presence." In other Greek literature, it was often applied to the arrival of a king or dignitary. The authors of the New Testament adopted the word to refer to the second coming of Christ. The first coming was the incarnation when Jesus came as a baby and grew to be a man, sacrificing himself on a cross to pay for our sins. The second coming of Jesus will be at the end of this age to judge those who have not turned from their sins and to gather those who have put their trust in him (Matthew 23:27-51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). We do not know when this will happen (Mark 13:32-35), but we are to live in such a way that we expect "the Lord's coming is near" (v. 8). We are to be patient like the farmers of this area who wait through the fall, winter, and spring rains before being able to harvest their crops in late spring and early summer (v.5).

5:10-11

James encourages his audience to follow the examples of patience set by the Old Testament prophets who faced great opposition as they delivered their messages. As well, Job is cited as an example of perseverance. While he complained bitterly of his lot, he never abandoned his faith and continued to put his hope in God (Job 1:20-22; 2:9-10; 19:25-27).

5:12-20

James abruptly begins his concluding comments for his letter by addressing three final issues in the community.

5:12

James does not prohibit taking oaths, such as God's before Abraham (Hebrews 6:13) or Jesus's before Caiaphas (Matthew 26:63-64) or Paul's (Romans 1:9; 9:1) (Barker, 2080). Rather, he prohibits the flippant use of God's name as a means of guaranteeing the truth of what has been spoken. In light of the focus of James on living out one's faith, Christians should reflect integrity in their speech to the point where an oath would not be required (Matthew 5:33-37).

5:14

After mentioning trouble and happiness as reasons to pray or praise, James also mentions sickness as another circumstance for prayer. He specifically mentions that the elders, those in leadership over the church, should pray and anoint with oil the head of that sick person. Oil was one of the best-known ancient medicines (Luke 10:34), and it was also often used in the Old Testament to set something or someone apart as God's (Exodus 29:1-7; 40:9). James likely encourages its use here as a symbolic action of the sick person being set apart for a special provision of God's care (Moo, 242). In the context of the following verses, it serves as an aid to faith, an outward sign of the healing to be brought about by God in response to prayer offered in faith (Barker, 2080).

5:15

James asserts that “the prayer offered in faith will make them well.” This does not mean that just because someone is not healed, there is a lack of faith. When we approach God with our requests, we are to do so with full faith that God is able to answer them. But we must also submit ourselves and our requests before God's will. He is able to heal, but at times he chooses not to. “The faith with which we pray is always faith in the God whose will is supreme and best” (Moo, 245).

5:16

While James doesn't suggest that all sickness is a result of sin, he does indicate that our choices have spiritual and physical ramifications. Since our choices are so important, the community should be involved in mutual confession and prayer. Together we can keep each other from experiencing the stain of sin.

5:17-18

Prayer is a tremendous spiritual gift in the hands of every believer, as evidenced by Elijah (1 Kings 17-18).

5:19-20

The letter of James is full of specific commands encouraging believers to live lives consistent with their faith. So it's no surprise he ends his letter with a final call to help others live consistent lives and a promise of restoration for those who turn back after having drifted away. If the "sinner" in the maxim of v. 20 is not a Christian, then "death" refers to the second death of Revelation 21:8. If the "sinner" refers to a Christian who has fallen away (2 Peter 2:20-22), then physical death is meant (1 Corinthians 11:29-32; 1 John 5:16).

Session 5 - Discussion

Introduction

James's audience likely felt overlooked by God since they were under the oppression of the rich and powerful. And it is tempting for us at times to wonder if God really sees us. So for them, and for us, James points forward to a time when God will set everything right—a time when our Savior will return to gather the faithful and judge those who do not acknowledge him. And until this time comes, we are left with the call to persevere in both our faith and our deeds.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt like your faithfulness went unnoticed? Have you ever been frustrated as you watched those with no ethical convictions get ahead? How does the looming judgment (vv. 8-9) affect your view of current injustice?
2. Read James 5:1-6. James condemns the wealthy landowners of his day for the way in which they used their money. How are you using your money? Do you see any evidence of hoarding or self-indulgence in your life? How could you be contributing to the injustice in this world?
3. What should be our response to injustice? Read James 5:10-11. How can we learn from the prophets who were patient as they spoke out for God?
4. Read James 5:13. Why is it important that we pray?
5. When have you seen God answer prayer?
6. Read James 5:16. How can we encourage and pray for each other to persevere in our faith?

Think About It

Over the course of his letter, James mentioned several different areas of life that require action and not merely discussion or theory. If there is a central theme in all of James's wisdom in this letter, it's that genuine faith is reflected in a life by deeds. In other words, if you're going to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. Where is there a discrepancy in what you believe and how you live out your beliefs?

What Will You Do?

Consider the words of James about praying for each other in 5:16. Reflect on what has resonated with you most deeply from this study in James. How can you ask your group to pray for you to experience life change in that particular area?

Changing Your Mind

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

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