

ALL SAINTS, WICK

— Know, Love & Follow Jesus —

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THE LETTER OF

JAMES

STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction and context

Space for your own notes

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 stumbled over the most. Surface reading of some of the passages could suggest that James hates anyone with money, and that if we have enough faith someone will always be healed of all sickness in this life.

So it may be helpful to remember that the overarching theme of this letter, now one of the books of the Bible, is that real faith in Jesus results in a life that is really lived for him. 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 what we can do, 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 AD62 so that helps us place the letter earlier than that and some would say it was written before the council of Jerusalem in AD48-49. 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 he picks up such as money and favouritism, persevering through trials, taming our tongues - are clearly of relevance for all believers at all times.

As I write in April 2020, we are in a unique situation ourselves. We are a 'scattered' church in a new sense of that word and so 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?

Space for your own notes

Sunday 19th April 2020

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 them help?
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 your current 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 26th April 2020

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 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 5th July 2020

James 5:13-20

Prayer of Faith

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v13) James seems to suggest in all circumstances we should communicate with God. How do you find communicating with God?
2. (v14-15) These verses specifically mention calling the elders of the church to pray for a sick person. Why might this be? Can every Christian pray for the sick to be healed?
3. (v15) 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?
4. (v15-16) James seems to make a link between physical healing and forgiveness. Is this always the case? Why do you think it is sometimes?
5. (v16) How easy do you find it to confess your sins to someone else (not just to God)? If you struggle with this, what needs to change to enable you to do this more often?
6. (v17-18) Why is Elijah an encouragement to us to pray? (Perhaps also see 1 Kings 18:41-46).
7. (v19) What would you say is the best way to help a brother or sister who has wandered from the truth?

Sunday 28th June 2020

James 5:1-12

Warnings and Encouragements

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. James gets a bit worked up about the "rich" in verses 1-6. How do you feel about this? Is it justified given what he is saying?
2. Verses 1-6 could easily have been spoken by Jesus (see Luke 12:13-21). Ask God to show you afresh how he feels about the way you handle money and possessions?
3. It would be very easy to brush aside these verses (1-6) and say they don't apply to us. But truly, these words may be the very words God wants to say to us. It isn't easy to hear God challenge us on things we have always assumed were fine. Maybe read them again and reflect how you need to respond.
4. (v7) Why does James include the picture of the farmer when talking about being patient?
5. (v8) What do you find most difficult about patience? Particularly when it comes to waiting for the Lord?
6. James talks about the prophets and Job (v10-11) as examples of patience in suffering. What has helped you when you have been through a season of prolonged suffering?
7. (v12) Discuss what you think this means for us today?

Sunday 3rd May 2020

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 with faith for the grace to follow Jesus his way rather than ours?

Sunday 10th May 2020

James 2:1-13

No Favouritism

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (2:1) What kinds 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 the teaching of his brother.
4. Can you think of ways that the Church has continued to trip up on teaching like this, and 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 21st June 2020

James 4:11-17

Don't Judge

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v11) What does "slandering one another" look like? It may be that it comes in various forms - some more obvious than others. Perhaps think over the last few weeks and reflect on what this verse means for the ways we have spoken recently.
2. (v12) The Old and New Testament clearly teach that part of God's character is as a judge. Judgement isn't a popular topic for many, how do you feel about God being a judge?
3. (v12) Do you feel you struggle with judging others? What areas of life do you find it difficult to forgive or let pass without needing to make a judgement? Does anything need to change in you? You might like to look at Matthew 7:1-5.
4. (13-14) Is it wrong to make (long-term) plans?
5. What do you make of verse 17? Can you think of any examples, where what verse 17 says, has been the case? Discuss.

Sunday 14th June 2020

James 4:1-10

Submitting to God

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (v1) Often the "desires that battle within you" are deeply hidden inside. Are you able to discuss with the group what battles you have? Ask God to show you what the first or next step is for you, to begin dealing with these things?
2. Discuss how verses 2-3 speak to us about how we should live and how we should pray? How do you deal with desires that aren't right?
3. (v4) What does it mean to be a friend of the world and why do you think James says this is a bad thing?
4. Verse 6 assures us of God's grace towards us. What part does humility play in receiving God's grace? What does "pride" look like in your life?
5. (v7) How do you resist the devil?
6. The first part of verse 8 is so reassuring. Maybe just dwell here for a moment and think through where in your life you need God to come near.
7. (v8-10) "Purify your hearts", "Grieve, mourn and wail", "change our laughter into mourning and our joy into gloom". Why should we do these things? Are we to be like this all the time? (see 5:13)? How do you humble yourself?

Sunday 17th May 2020

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 of your week?

Sunday 24th May 2020

James 3:1-12

Taming the Tongue

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. (3:1) James acknowledges that we all slip up sometimes, and that how we speak is particularly tricky. 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) Likewise the tongue, he says. And it can set forests on fire. 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 yet...?! 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) Another stark warning and highlighting of how we use our speech. Could we do more of the praising in order to do less of the cursing?
6. (v11-12) James says this double standard just should not be. Yet he knows we all slip up. Today is a good day for a double prayer - forgiveness for our failures in speech and grace for more speech that builds, encourages and enables!
7. How would you summarise these 12 verses of chapter 3? Is there any particular application for the way that modern communication enables us to speak? How could Christians model faithful speech online as well as in person?

Sunday 7th June 2020

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 21st century Britain?
2. (v14) Bitter envy and selfish ambition will eat us up. Today is another good opportunity to 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? James has already told us to ask for wisdom and here are some great aspects to seek from God.
6. Verse 18 brings us back to the peacemakers of Jesus' sermon on the mount. 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? What is God saying to you about the wisdom he can give to you and how you could put it into action?