



Troy Church of Christ

Draw Near to God

a study of the epistle of James

Background

James, the brother of Jesus, writes his letter “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations [diaspora].” The “diaspora” refers to those Jews (in this case, Jewish Christians) who were scattered beyond the land of Israel. James was prominent figure in the book of Acts, and was among those who helped to settle the disagreement between Jewish and Gentile Christians (see Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council). He was a leader among the Jewish Christians, and writes to encourage them to remain faithful in the midst of temptation and trial.

James is a very pithy writer, so his letter sometimes comes across a bit more frankly than some others. He doesn’t mince words or pull any punches.

Trials - Now in Technicolor!

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (1:2-4, ESV)

- “Count it all joy...” How does this work? Is it a positive thinking that ignores reality, a stoicism that becomes numb to reality, a “joyful pessimism” that doesn’t care about this world, or is there some other approach to which James is calling us? Explain why/why not?
- Just to bring it back into our own backyard for a second... How does this conflict with our culture of instant gratification? How should our example of handling trials stand out as light in a dark world?
- “...trials of various kinds” - The Greek here is “ποικίλος” and carries the idea of “multi-colored” trials, or a diversity of trials. While the truth of James’s remarks certainly carry us to an application to all the kinds of trials we encounter in life, there are specific trials the letter reveals that was addressing here. A quick sampling can be seen in 2:1-7 & 5:1-6. List the trials you see in these passages:

Getting A's in the School of Hard Knocks

- What does James say will be the reward for hanging tough through the oppression and exploitation they were facing?
- Is there a difference between what James says here and simply telling someone to “keep a stiff upper lip” or to “suck it up?”
- We live in a world that is desperate need of hope, and is looking for it in many places, both good and bad. What hope does James say God has for us? How would you communicate this to people in difficult situations that you encounter?
- There are still people in our society and abroad that, like these early Christians, are being exploited in the marketplace, in courts, and in society as a whole. What role do Christians play, in a practical way, in seeing justice come to these people, and in holding out hope to them? What is our message beyond, “it’ll be better in the next life” (because we *definitely* do have a better message than just that!)? Share scriptures that address this.

Wisdom, Faith, and Doubt

- Trials can leave us reeling, unsure of how best to proceed. When that happens, James says God is a limitless, guilt-free source of wisdom. How do we get this wisdom? How do we know when we have “gotten it?”
- What is the fruit of wobbling, waffling doubt? What is the antidote James offers?

Final Thought

James begins his letter to a people far from home and facing many difficulties with this encouragement: Stay faithful, be anchored in God, and He will bring you through stronger and more secure than ever.



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Blessed is the Man...

- When you hear the word *blessed* in a phrase like, “Blessed is the man who stands up under trial...” does it shape your definition of the word? If so, how?
- What is the promise from God if you stay faithful in spite of trying times and circumstances?

Can I help it if God made me this way? Yep.

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”
(vss. 13-15)

- Why do we blame God for trials and temptations? Why does James say we’re barking up the wrong tree when we do? (vs. 14 & 17)
- James goes further than just saying we should not blame God. Where does he say the real responsibility for our temptations lies? What does this teach you about yourself? (vs. 14)
- Why do you think he ends this thought with “Do not be deceived”? In what ways are we deceived/in danger of being deceived in regard to temptations? What are the dangers involved for us? (vs. 15-16)

Every Good and Perfect Gift

- In verse 18, what is the gift we have been given?
- From what have we been “brought forth”? By what means has God brought us forth, according to this passage?
- What is the significance of this reference to these Christians as being “firstfruits”?

Know This, My Beloved Brothers...

- Let every person be:
 - Quick to _____
 - Slow to _____
 - Slow to become _____
- Why does unchecked anger keep you spiritually immature?
- What else does James say we will have to abandon? What does he say we should embrace, and what does he say would be the result? (vss. 21-22)

Now Take a Good Close Look in the Mirror

- It’s so easy to read a passage like these in James and be convicted, but what does James say the danger is if we read and are convicted, but don’t act?
- Why do you think we like to feel convicted, but don’t like actually moving on those convictions?
- We come full circle in verse 25, talking about people being blessed. What kind of people are blessed? How/when are they blessed?

Give Me That Ol’ Time Religion!

- A lot of people we run into are sick of “religion.” Why? How do you think they would react to the kind of religion James describes in vss. 26-27?

Heartwork

James touches several bases in this brief chapter, and probably steps on several toes! Spend some time this week looking at James 1 as your personal prayer list. List what things you saw in yourself as you read this chapter and pray for God’s help and wisdom as you strive to grow.



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Ice Breaker

- Share a story of a time when you arrived at an event and were dressed completely wrong, or were extremely out of place. How did people treat you? How did you feel?

As Believers in Our Lord Jesus Christ...

- How do we show favoritism toward the rich?
- How do we show favoritism *against* the poor?
- Why do we make assumptions and judge people by what we see? (Check out Luke 18:10-14)
- How have such prejudices made for bad theology? How would a healthy theology change the way we see and treat the poor? (James clearly believes it would, note his appeal: "As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ...")
- What is it about a person—any and every person—that is inherently worthy of our respect? How do you see this at work in Jesus' treatment of the poor and downtrodden?

You Have Insulted The Poor

- In verses 2-4 James paints a picture of a circumstance in which a poor man is told to sit on the floor at the feet of the rich (literally, as if a footstool for the rich). This picture might seem shocking, but it still goes on, perhaps in more subtle ways. How does such an attitude find its expression in our culture? Why is this counter to the gospel itself?
- In vs. 4 James says that when we make such determinations about the worth of people, we are judges with evil thoughts—strong words.

- In vs. 6-7 the writer points out the incredible irony of their discriminatory attitudes. What was it?

Has God Not Chosen The Poor?

- Verse 5 bares a striking resemblance to the "blessings and woes" of Luke 6:17-25.

The Royal Law Of Love

- Once again we see that all of life hinges on what Jesus called "The Greatest Commands." How does James say all the wrongs of discrimination are righted?
- Finish this sentence of James's: "Speak and acts as those who _____." James makes your treatment of others a part of your relationship with God. You'll never have a better relationship with God that you have with His children. The two are inseparably intertwined.
- With what encouragement does James end this section?

Heartwork

In the end, what we see here is a very different perspective that we are to have of "rich/poor"—a kingdom perspective vs. a worldly perspective. How does the kingdom view contrast? What scriptures reveal God's attitude?

Worldly View

Only rich truly worthy

Poor unworthy of honor

If rich, must be doing right

Appearances are everything

Clothes make the man

Dignity comes only with position

Kingdom View



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Ice Breaker

- What is the worst product you have ever bought that just didn't function as advertised?

What Good Is It?

There are times when the chapter/section changes make us think the writer is changing topics when he really isn't. This seems to be one of those. In reality, James is still speaking to a topic he introduced back at the end of chapter one—what religion to God really is. He started by talking about caring for orphans and widows, and keeping ourselves from being worldly, then applied the latter by pointing out that socio-economic bigotry has no place in the kingdom of God. He continues this thought in a section of the letter that has often been controversial. The controversy has been that some take James to be saying we are saved by our good deeds. In fact, he is saying that no saved person will live without doing good, because genuine faith always leads to good deeds.

- Let's start by letting James ask the first question: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?"
- Prior to asking this question James was condemning discrimination based on wealth and reminding the believers that we will be shown mercy as we have shown mercy. How does our being shown mercy tie into the question of faith & deeds? (Consider Matthew 10:7-8 & Acts 20:35)
- What practical example does James use to illustrate his point? What does his choice of example tell us about what the main point really is?

- Why is it wrong to treat a person in this way? (Discuss 1st John 3:14-19)

A Diagnosis

- If you were baptized but never changed anything about how you lived—never cared about the widow, never repented of worldly actions, continued to judge based on appearances, were indifferent to the needs of the poor, to use James's examples—would that make *any* sense? In verse 17 James gives his diagnosis of people like this. What is it?

It's Put Up Or Shut Up Time

- How does James say we ultimately prove the reality of our faith?
- Why is this the only real proof? (see Luke 6:43-49)
- What did Abraham and Rahab have in common that showed their faith in God? If Rahab had simply said, "Be warm, well fed, and good luck getting away from the guards!" would you believe she really had faith? Would others believe you if you spoke but didn't act?

Heartwork

Do you believe that God has shown you mercy? Do you believe He has called you to love your neighbor by helping orphans, widows, and those in need? What actions in your life show this? What actions/inaction tell a different story? What needs to change?



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Ice Breaker

- Who was your favorite teacher in school? Why?

Not Many of You Should Become Teachers

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James 3:1, ESV

- James Coffman has said about this passage, “In saying, ‘Be not many teachers,’ James did not seek to discourage any who might have been qualified for such work. As Harper suggested, ‘His words were meant to remind us of our responsibilities, rather than to deter us from our duties.’”
- Why would James say that teachers are going to be “judged more strictly” (NIV)? What does this teach us about not only the importance of our character, but also of the nature of teaching?

Careful Little Mouth What You Say

- James says, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a _____ man.” As we have seen in previous studies, the Greek word translated “perfect” (*teleios*) is a word meaning “mature, complete; having reached completion.” How is it that if we are able to display self-control with our tongue then we will be mature, complete, and whole people?
- Where does real self-control come from? (See Galatians 5:22-26) How do we submit our speech to the Holy Spirit?

- James compares the tongue to a bit in a horse’s mouth, or a ship’s rudder. In what ways does our mouth often lead us, good or bad? How is it like a spark in a forest?

- Look at the following passages:

- Proverbs 10:19
- Proverbs 15:1
- Psalm 19:14
- Matthew 12:34

- Many struggle with profanity, gossip, angry words, constant destructive criticism, harshness, etc. All of these are acts of the tongue that James says is “set on fire by Hell.” We may think our words are “just words” but that is not an idea we find in scripture at all. Words can build, they can heal, or they can be destructive and bring glimpses of hell to their hearers. What kind of words are to be yours as you follow Christ? How are you struggling in this way? (See Ephesians 4:29)

- What does James say, “ought not to be so”? (See James 3:9-12)

Heartwork

Our words do not originate on the tip of our tongue, though we sometimes give so little thought to them we might think so. Any real change of our words begins in the heart. As you pray during the next several days, ask God to begin working on your heart, mind, and soul. It is only when we yield to God from within that the words of our heart will finally become a blessing and not a curse.



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Ice Breaker

- What is the strangest good advice (surprised you it worked, for example) or the worst advice (you thought it would, but it didn't) you've ever received?

Who is Wise and Understanding Among You?

James asks the question above, and that's where we will begin, but from two different angles.

- Who does the world consider wise? What criteria does the world use? Where do they seek wisdom?
- How does a person with only worldly "wisdom" live (14-16)?
- What criteria does Scripture say we should use to determine who is wise? Where are we told to seek our wisdom? (See James 1:5-8; Proverbs 3:5-14)
- How does a person with godly wisdom live (13, 17)?

Self-Examination

- It is always important that we not only look at what the scriptures say, but that we examine ourselves and make the changes necessary to develop a godly character (see James 1:22-25). One way to do this is to look at these two lists contrasting worldly and godly wisdom. Which looks most like your life?
- Why do we (believers) so often find ourselves looking no different than the world around us? What does this say about where we are getting our wisdom?

Wisdom that Comes Down from Heaven

If we were going to look for an example of one who by their actions exemplified a wisdom that is from above, we could find no one better than Jesus. Share examples from the gospels of Jesus having the traits of wisdom James lists:

- Purity
 - Peace-loving
 - Considerate
 - Submissive
 - Merciful
 - Sincere
- Matt Dabbs, in his study of this passage, asks: "Being humble and leading a good life are not modeled very well for us in the movies or on television. People just don't seem to think there is much adventure or excitement in that. Do you think that Christians can live wise, humble lives and still have fun and excitement? How?"
 - A consistent cry in the world is for peace—peace in our homes, peace in our spirit, and peace on the world stage. In verse 18 we find the answer to how peace can be attained wherever it is needed. What is James's answer?

Heartwork

The book of Proverbs is a book written primarily by Solomon* to encourage his sons to choose wisdom over folly. It is a collection of wisdom on various aspects of life, faith, and relationships, and is timeless in its relevance. Commit to reading a chapter a day for the next month.

* The last two chapters were written by Agur & Lemuel.



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Ice Breaker

- What is the most foolish fight or argument you ever got into? What were you fighting over?

Where do Fights and Wars Come From?

- Very often when we get into fights and arguments, or even when nations go to war, there are underlying reasons beyond the stated reasons for the fights. Where does James say that fights ultimately originate? (vs. 1)
- What does James say is the outcome? (vs. 2, see also Matthew 5:21-22)
 - Why do our desires lead to such drastic mistreatment of our neighbors?
 - What must we have forgotten to see our neighbors as being worthless compared to our desires?
 - How does this contrast with the example of Jesus?
- James says you do not have what you desire because “_____.” What other hindrance does he say stands in the way? (vs. 3)

Be Not Deceived...

- In 1st Corinthians 15:33 Paul writes, “Be not deceived: Evil companionships corrupt good

morals.” (ASV) How does that dovetail with James’s remarks in 4:4?

- What do you understand “friendship with the world” to be? What are the dangers James is warning us to avoid?

- What strong word does James use to address us with if we are too entangled in worldly thinking and living? Why does he use that term?

(See the book of Hosea during your personal study for a deeper understanding from God’s point of view.)

But He Gives Us More Grace...

As we have seen throughout this study, James pulls no punches and minces no words, but neither is his goal to leave us bloodied and beaten by a fire and brimstone message. Instead, he calls us to look honestly at our failings, turn back to God alone, and then reminds us of the grace of Jesus that saves us still.

- He closes this paragraph (vs. 6) with an Old Testament quote (Proverbs 3:34), “God opposes the _____, but gives _____ to the _____.”

Heartwork

Look back at your most recent squabbles. Can you identify where you may have had desires and motives that were less than honorable? We all struggle with selfishness and seeking our own good over that of others. Spend some time in prayer asking for God’s help in healing both you and those with whom you have recently fought, and seek to restore peace with them.



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Ice Breaker

- What is a humiliating moment you've experienced?

God Opposes The Proud. But...

At the end of our last lesson we looked at James's quote of Proverbs 3:34 which says, "God opposes the proud, but gives _____ to the _____. Now in James 4:7-12 James will show us *how* to be humble, and thereby experience the grace of God.

- With what two actions does James say humility starts? How are they intertwined?
- In verse 8 James makes a call for real repentance, and we are told to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. How does that happen?
- What does "double-minded" mean (see James 1:8)?
- What is the value of learning to mourn?
- When it is more appropriate to experienced gloom than joy?
- Over what does James urge us to mourn? Do you take sin seriously enough to describe your reaction to your weaker moments as mourning

or grieving? What is the difference between feeling guilt and being guilty of a wrongdoing?

- What role does this play in humbling ourselves before the Lord (vs. 10)? Why is it impossible for God to lift up the proud?

If You Can't Say Anything Nice...

- "Do not _____ against one another, brothers."
 - Matthew 5:21-26
 - Psalm 19
 - Ephesians 4:29-32
- Looking at verses 11 & 12, the word "law" here is not the Law of Moses, but rather the body of the teachings of Scripture. So, if we are refusing to love our neighbor or our brother/sister, and we are saying evil about them, we are looking at Christ's commands to love one another and judging them as unworthy of our obedience, and making ourselves judge and jury of who is and isn't worthy of being loved as Christ would love them. This flies in the face of the gospel itself,

Heartwork

We are taught in 1 Cor. 11 the importance of evaluating our hearts and actions *before* we participate in the Lord's Supper. Before we gather again, take some time to consider these words of James, and if there is reconciliation you need to seek with a brother or sister, do so before we gather this Sunday (Mt. 5:21-26).



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Ice Breaker

What is something you thought you would have accomplished by this point in your life, but haven't?

The Trouble With Boasting

James says in 4:13-14, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring." What does he say is the problem with this statement?

- How do you know when you are leaning only on yourself for your plans?
- How can you lean more on God?
 - Proverbs 21:5
 - Proverbs 16:3
 - Proverbs 3:5-10
 - Philippians 4:6

Yet, You Don't Know...

None of us knows what lies ahead. Not in ten minutes, not tomorrow, certainly not in the coming years.

- In submitting our plans to the Lord, for what possibility do we need to plan?
- Why is it important to remember that our "life

is a mist" and we will not be around forever?

Lord Willing...

James is dealing with a deep attitude of our hearts—whether or not we really see our life as being in God's hands, whether or not we understand the brevity of our life, and whether or not we are really consulting God's will and submitting our plans to His will. What simple discipline does James say we should take on to help us keep the proper perspective? Why would such a simple change be helpful?

- What is it that he again says is "boasting" and "arrogant"? What makes it "evil"?
- James closes this thought with, "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This verse is often quoted apart from its context, which may cause us to miss part of the reason James says it when he does. What is James's point here *in light of the context of planning & boasting*?

Heartwork

Consider the following questions:

- Do I really want what God wants? Have I considered how that might change my plans?
- What might change to bring glory to God?

Spend some time in prayer and in the Word seeking His will and guidance, reconsidering your plans for the future (and present). Then, commit it to the Lord!



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Ice Breaker

- There is a saying, “Yesterday’s luxuries are today’s necessities.” What is a luxury you don’t think you could live without that didn’t even exist 100 years ago?

The Maginot Line of Earthly Wealth

“A rich man’s wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination.” Proverbs 18:11 ESV

After World War I, the French were determined to see to it that Germany would not be able to invade their borders again, so they built a line of concrete and steel bunkers, artillery casements, and fortifications that ran the eastern border of France (facing Germany). It was a remarkable engineering achievement, and highly advanced at the time. It seemed impenetrable. The Germans, however, were able to flank to the left of the wall through Belgium and bypassed the Maginot Line altogether in two days time, and France fell to the Germans quickly.

- How is earthly wealth like the Maginot Line?
- What sources of wealth does James say are ruined? (1-3)

The Heart of the Problem

- Why does James say their wealth is ruined?
- What were the root problems?

- Look at these passages: Proverbs 28:8; 28:6; 14:31; 16:8; 29:7; 11:28
- In verse 4 James says that the pay they had withheld from the workers cried out against them. This is very similar in wording to God’s statement that Abel’s blood cried out against Cain. What does this tell us about our own deeds?
- What does it tell us about withholding what we rightfully owe another? Does this principle apply more broadly? (*hint: see Proverbs 3:27,28 and 21:13*)

What Did Jesus Say?

James’s language here is profoundly prophetic in tone. If you didn’t know who wrote the letter, you might think it was Amos, Isaiah, or Micah. There are striking similarities to the words of Christ, James’s brother in the flesh, too. Look at Luke 6:20-31.

Heartwork

In the end, James reveals that the deeper problem is not so much wealth in and of itself, but selfish hearts willing to put the needs of others aside for personal gain. We do not have to be wealthy in the eyes of the world to struggle with this sin. What do you need to let go of? Who might you be neglecting in order to keep your gain to yourself?



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Ice Breaker

- What is one thing for which you have a very difficult time waiting?

Be Patient, Therefore...

It has often been said that wherever you see “therefore” you know you need to read what is “before” to understand the “therefore”...therefore, before getting into James’s encouragement to be patient, it is important to remember that he has just delivered a rebuke to the rich and oppressive of the world. He is now turning his attention back to his brothers and sisters who are at the other end of the spectrum and giving them a word of encouragement as they struggle to make ends meet and keep the faith.

- What is the first thing he reminds those who are struggling to do? Why do we have such a difficult time with this?
- The Greek word in this case is μακροθυμew. It means “to persevere patiently and bravely in enduring misfortunes and troubles; longsuffering” (*Strong’s*). Is there a difference between this definition and the “working definition” that you think of? How does bravery work into your being patient?
- What do we learn from James’s example of the farmer waiting for his crops to yield?
- In verse 8, what simple reminder is he saying will help us to be resolute in our faith and wait patiently?

Don't Grumble About Each Other

- Why, in the midst of hardship, is grumbling a legitimate concern for James as he writes this letter?

- Again in verse 9, James appeals to the presence of the Lord—last time as an encouragement to remain strong, this time to remind us not to mistreat one another (“... the Judge is standing at the door!”). It is James’s contention that the presence of the Lord changes our perspective, and that changes how we will treat one another and endure hardship. If a person is impatient and constantly hurting others...what might that say about the Lord’s presence in that life? How can we encourage them to remember that God is near?
- In verses 10-11 we’re reminded of the examples of the prophets and what they endured. How were the prophets treated (share specific examples if you can)?
- Job lost his children, his considerable wealth, his respect among those who felt he must have done something to deserve his plight, and his health. However, here we are reminded not just of his suffering, but the end of the story. How did Job’s story end (see Job 42)? What does that teach us?

Let Your Yes be Yes, and Your No, No

- Once again James reveals the heart of his letter is from the heart of Christ himself. In verse 12 he calls us to endure not just with patience and strength, but with integrity and commitment, reminding us of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Look at Matthew 5:33-37.



DEAR GOD, PLEASE GIVE ME PATIENCE ... AND I NEED IT RIGHT NOW!!!



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Ice Breaker

- What is the worst illness you have ever experienced?

Got Trouble? Joy? Illness?

In this final section of James's epistle, he comes back around to the topic of suffering. This word (Greek: *κακοπαθεω*, *kakopatheo*) carries the more general idea of suffering and is not specific to disease or physical problems, as in verse 14.

- What does James say is the natural response of a Christian when going through troubles?
- Next he asks if anyone is happy (some translations use the word "cheerful" which may be more accurate, cheer being from the inside out rather than from the outside in). What does James say is the natural outpouring of Christian cheer? Why would singing be the response of a joyful heart?
- For these to become our normal response to trouble or cheerfulness, what has to happen within us first? In other words, these are *not* necessarily the responses to our circumstances that come to us by nature. What produces people that respond in such ways?

Who You Gonna Call?

- What does verse 14 say we should do when we are facing serious illness?
- There has been debate over the past couple of centuries as to whether the anointing of oil here is meant as a simple medicinal treatment or as an anointing associated with miraculous healing. The reason for the debate is that in their time, oil was used in both ways, and James simply doesn't give enough information to say definitively. We know that the apostles when sent out to heal anointed with oil when healing the sick (Mark 6:13), and we know that oil was often used to treat wounds. The

important part of the phrase here, though, is "in the name of the Lord."

- What does it mean to do something "in the name of the Lord?" (see also Jesus' promise to the apostles in John 14:13-14)

Ultimately, in all these responses to trouble, good, or illness, James is calling us to always respond by faith.

Effective Prayer

- What other kind of healing does James say we can find if we go to God in prayer by faith?
- In verse 16 we read, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Where does the real power lie? What kind of person does this motivate you to be?
- What example of such faith does he share?

GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH
P S A L M 4 6 : 1
A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE

Covering A Multitude Of Sins

James is a pithy writer. He can, at least to us sensitive and too PC Americans, be a bit rough around the edges. Frankly, that's what I like about his letter. Don't let his direct nature fool you, though. James is clearly writing from a place of love and care for the souls of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He takes sin seriously, and doesn't want us to get comfortable in a world that would rather sink faith than support it. He wants us to take the spiritual health of our Christian family seriously, and not neglect to care for souls in need.

- What encouragement do we gain in verse 20?