

# Introduction to James

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, August 22, 2007

&ldquo;Introducing James&rdquo;

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

If you haven't already done so as a group, please take the time necessary in your group tonight and read the Letter of James in its entirety.

This quarter in our LIFE Groups we are going to be studying this Letter of James which could easily be called the most practical book in the New Testament, a book that empathetically calls us as Christians to a radically different lifestyle than those in the world.

The message of James is basically about one thing - getting real with your faith. James believed that Christ-followers should not only wear the outfit, but they must run the race! They must walk the talk!

Be prepared. James is harsh and dogmatic. You will feel the sting of his words. Expect this study to be difficult &ndash; not because it is hard to understand but because it is all too easy to understand.

15 Minutes - DIG

We meet several men in the New Testament who have the name James. It seems though that only two of them were prominent enough to write this letter: (1) James the brother of John, one of the twelve apostles; and (2) James the brother of Jesus. The former James, as Luke tells us, was executed by Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2) and this letter was probably not written this early. So we are left with James the brother of the Lord as the most likely author (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). This James did not at first believe in Jesus's messianic claims (John 7:5), but was apparently converted as a result of Jesus's resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:7). He became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem. He led the first church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) which decided that Gentiles did not

have to adopt the Jewish traditions and customs before they could be saved. This is an important factor in assessing James's view of faith and works (2:14-26).

James describes the people he is writing to very generally: "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1). The "twelve tribes" were social and political groups in Israel claiming descent from one of the twelve sons of Jacob. It seems obvious that James is writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered across many nations (the diaspora), but also know the language had become symbolic of the people of God (Galatians 6:16; 1 Peter.2:9-10) and could very well refer to Christians in general.

Acts 11:19 suggests the circumstances of the readers that James addresses in his letter: "Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews." With this scenario then, the Jewish Christians James addresses are living as exiles in areas near Palestine because of their faith in Jesus. Their status as exiles explains why they are experiencing some of the trials James mentions: they are poor (5:1-11), they are hauled into court by wealthy people (2:4-6), and they are oppressed by large landowners (5:5-6).

James clearly belongs to the genre of being a letter. It has been categorized as a "general letter," written to the whole church rather than to one specific congregation.

Some scholars classify this letter as a part of "wisdom literature" for a couple of reasons: (1) he refers to wisdom twice in the letter (1:5; 3:13-18), and (2) the brief, direct, and practical admonitions of the letter remind us of the style of Proverbs.

After the brief introductions, James jumps right into the reality that Christians will face trials and temptations. Are you struck by this beginning to this important letter?

Note the word "consider" which is a word that means evaluate. It's an accounting term. It is pretty odd to consider it pure joy when you face the trials of life. So what is the "joy" he is talking about here?

This "joy" will only come after we have gathered all the information and clearly understand that such serves to test and prove our faith knowing that God is working through each trial of life to build real character and integrity in our lives.

And then comes perseverance — "because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (1:3-4).

James wanted his readers to know that we've got to cooperate with God's maturing process. We have got to cooperate with the trials.

Does this give you a new perspective on why we as Christians should welcome trials?

And then James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave

of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord: he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does" (1:5-8).

James tells us that when we lack wisdom . . . when we don't understand what is going on - - ask God. We have got to engage in conversation with God. This is an important ingredient in the faith formula. James tells us to not be afraid to ask God; He has the answers.

What are the ways in which God will provide you with these answers?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

So what characteristics have we already discovered in this letter that are important in becoming a mature follower of Jesus Christ?

Begin tonight to make a list of James's teaching as to what constitutes a "mature Christian."

In what area of your life do you need wisdom from God right now?

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight?

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

# Seeing the Trials of Life in a Different Light

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, August 29, 2007

&ldquo;Seeing the Trials of Life in a Different Light&rdquo;

James 1:2-8

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Allow different ones in the group to share what has been a trial (an un-wanted and un-welcomed experience) they have gone through in recent months.

When you are beaten down by life&rsquo;s circumstances, to whom do you turn for help and encouragement?

15 Minutes - DIG

After a very brief introduction, James jumps right into the reality that Christians will face trials and temptations. Are you struck by this beginning to this important letter?

Why do you think it was that James starts off this letter with this discussion?

Note the word &ldquo;consider&rdquo; which is a word that means evaluate. It&rsquo;s an accounting term. It is not natural to be joyful when you face one of life&rsquo;s trials. Is joy an emotion you have ever experienced in the midst of a storm? What is the &ldquo;joy&rdquo; he is talking about here?

Before we go any further, how have you come to understand the &ldquo;divine permission&rdquo; of the trials that come your way?

This "joy" will only come after we have gathered all the information and clearly understand that such serves to test and prove our faith knowing that God is working through each trial of life to build real character and integrity in our lives.

And then comes perseverance – "because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (1:3-4).

Let's first develop a working definition for perseverance. What is it? Why is perseverance important? What reward comes with persevering in the faith?

James wanted his readers to know that we've got to cooperate with God's maturing process. We have got to cooperate with the trials.

For believers, trials are not accidents and purposeless. In verses 3-4, James provides his readers with the purpose of trials:

- \* The testing of the believer's faith produces perseverance;
- \* Perseverance produces spiritual maturity.

Does this give you a new perspective on why we as Christians should welcome trials?

And then James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord: he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does" (1:5-8).

James tells us that when we lack wisdom . . . when we don't understand what is going on - - ask God. We have got to engage in conversation with God. This is an important ingredient in the faith formula. James tells us to not be afraid to ask God; He has the answers.

What are the ways in which God will provide you with these answers?

James wanted his readers to live with expectation that we will endure trials and to not surrender to the trouble they bring. His encouragement was for believers to endure trials faithfully and stand steady through the storms of life. When such steadfastness has its full effect, then God's faithful people will be "mature, not lacking anything";

Under pressure, how does the mature Christian (vv. 5-6a) contrast with the person described in verses 6b-8?

What does it mean to be a double-minded person? Is James talking about being divided between good and evil? Belief and unbelief? Trust and distrust?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

Why is it important to see the trials of life that we experience as being a part of the maturing process? How do the trials that we experience expose our need for God's wisdom?

How will this change your prayers in the midst of the storm? Why did James advise to pray for wisdom? And what are we going to do with the doubt?

In what area of your life do you need wisdom from God right now?

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight?

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

# Satan's Playground

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, September 5, 2007

“Satan’s Playground”;

James 1:9-18

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

After unveiling a more appropriate way of looking at trials, James then jumps straight into a discussion of finances. Here again, he turns things upside down.

From the very beginning of his letter, James seems determined to highlight our self-reliant tendencies! And now the penetrating question is “Is financial status a good measure of a man?”

To keep everything in this letter in its proper context, we will often remind you as we move through this study that the whole thrust of James’s letter is his emphasis on spiritual maturity. He wanted people to know how to have an authentic faith.

Consider for a minute your Christian life like unto building a spiritual portfolio. How can handling a trial with joy and faithfulness result in a deposit in our account? Can maintaining a proper attitude toward the stewardship of money count as a deposit in our account?

15 Minutes - DIG

On multiple occasions, Jesus said that “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” In verses 9-11, James introduced one of the cardinal teachings of the gospel – the theme of reversal.

James wanted those in the humblest condition to boast in the high position that will be theirs in the future with God. They are to rejoice that God has lifted them up to make His strength perfect in their weakness.

The rich and the strong are to rejoice that God has helped them down from their rickety ladder of self-reliance and self-love. James told the rich that they need to humble themselves against the temptation of trusting in their wealth rather than placing trust in God.

The ground at the foot of the cross is level!

One cannot deny that James begins here to express the full force of his indignation against the injustice perpetuated by the rich against the poor. It will come up again. Using the imagery from nature, he said that the rich are like a wild flower, which often was used in Old Testament image to reflect how fragile life really is (Is. 40:6-8; Ps. 103:15-16).

From here, James raises an important question - How are temptations different from trials?

Trials beset us from without. They are an inevitable part of living in a fallen, sin-cursed world. Temptations, however, spring from within when a person is tempted by his or her "own evil desire" (v. 14). Temptation to sin is the operation of evil forces and the devil.

Without question, James is combating a false notion that God is the source of temptation. James proclaimed that God is the source of "every good and perfect gift" (v. 17). In the earlier section (vv.2-8), James indicates that God allows for us to experience the trials of life and these prove to be test of our faith.

Satan tempts us to make us do wrong. Satan uses the evil desires that are in each one of us and creates custom "lures" that appeal to our own personal vulnerabilities.

Evil desires originate from within the believer. When you have a dark desire in your life that begins to go haywire (that desire to lie, to lust, to exaggerate, to steal something, to take that materialistic trip, to rev up those envy engines), James says there is one thing you should not do. What is that?

Our evil desires have a reproductive life of their own. We have to realize that a temptation is deceptively disguised. Temptation lures our desires. James says that the offspring of desire is sin. When the sin is full-grown, its offspring is death. Sin always has consequences.

How is God the ultimate example of goodness and dependability?

James made it clear that believers have faith because God gives them spiritual birth (Jn. 1:13; Phil. 1:29). He clearly contrast God's action of engendering life with the death that results from allowing sin to conceive in one's life and bring death. The word of truth from God, which brought forth the first creation, now brings about the regeneration of human beings (v. 18).

## 15 Minutes - REFLECT

Most of us do not like to take the blame for our own sins. God does not leave us the option of playing the blame game. Our sins and evil desires come right out of our own sin nature. Why is this important to admit?

What have you found helpful in dealing with temptation?

The good news is that God has promised that He will never leave us without an escape. He will never let us get into a situation where we can't bear the pressure (1 Cor. 10:13).

God will provide a way out, a way of escape, a freeway if you will. We cannot find the freeway or way of escape on our own. It has to be by God's grace, His discernment, and His power.

Site a recent example where God provided you an escape from some trying situation.

## 5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight?

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Father.

# Words, Words, Words

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, September 12, 2007

&ldquo;Words, Words, Words&rdquo;

James 1:19-27

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

We all do it. While someone else is talking, we&rsquo;re thinking about what we're going to say next instead of listening to the person talking to you. We know others are worth more care and attention. We know better, but the habit is hard to break! God wants us to slow down and listen.

Anyone had a conversation today which in retrospect you would acknowledge that you're not pleased with how you listened?

Why is it so difficult for you to be a good listener?

15 Minutes - DIG

James states his conviction in 1:18 that God chose to give us &ldquo;spiritual birth&rdquo; so that we can become a &ldquo;kind of firstfruits of all he created.&rdquo; God desires there to be a new beat and rhythm to our life. A new character. He wants us to reflect His grace and power. This is a central message of James' writing!

From this point forward in his letter, James specifically asked his readers to &ldquo;take note&rdquo; of three exhortations he gives them:

- \* Be quick to listen;
- \* Be slow to speak;
- \* Be slow to anger.

It is no wonder he starts out in his letter emphasizing these disciplines. Why?

How can being "quick to listen and slow to speak" help us to be "slow to become angry" (v. 19)?

Go a step further. Read Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

Listening is powerful, but it is a learned commodity. We should listen more than we speak. It's pretty obvious — God designed us with two ears and only one mouth. But so many of us just don't listen well. And I would suggest this starts with our failure to listen to God!

Try something. In your prayer life this week, instead of talking to God so much about your own stuff, try listening to God. That may take you to scripture. It may demand you just be still and listen for God's gentle voice!

Have you ever tried to have a relationship with someone who talks all the time? As much as you try, it is hard to get close to someone where only one-way communication is taking place. Seriously, some of us are that way in our relationship with God and we never really get to know Him!

Don't blow over this! Let the group react to these thoughts suggesting that some of us just don't do well listening to God.

When have you experienced the truth that "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (v. 20)?

When you see a Christian husband get angry and verbally attack his wife out in public, is your immediate reaction to question the character and righteousness of his life? Does this outburst give you a glimpse into the real character of the man?

What are the things in your life which threaten to choke out God's Word which is planted in you (v. 21)?

In your own words explain how the person who merely listens is different from the one who puts God's Word into practice (vv. 22-25)?

James used the illustration of a person looking intently into a mirror. This "mirror" concept is a reader's key to understanding this section of James' letter.

James implied two mistakes that occur when the believer fails to act upon the word: (1) the believer doesn't treat the truth of the word as reality; and (2) the believer ignores the message of the word.

James told his readers that it is "the law that gives freedom." What is this freedom (Rom. 6:18-22; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 2:4; 5:1, 13-14; 6:2)?

According to verses 26 and 27, how do people who think they are religious differ from those who are truly religious?

It is sometimes much easier to follow a rule than to love your enemy or pursue justice, mercy, and the weightier matters of the law. Could it be that someone could actually feel secure and righteous while pursuing an unrighteous life? The evidence of this is overwhelming, as people behave unjustly, unmercifully, and un-lovingly. In following what become religious rules and regulations, people rationalize and become desensitized to their arrogant, selfish, mean-spirited behavior that evidences itself in the junk that comes out of our mouths.

We should always check ourselves and make sure that pursuing justice and mercy are primary acts of "religion" and that we've not relegated such to minor points of doctrine and practice.

Do you really believe these are core values of our Christian faith?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

What does it mean to be "slow to speak"? Is he talking about words being strategic, thoughtful, measured, and discerning?

Consider these words of wisdom from King Solomon on this subject — Proverbs 10:10; 13:3; 29:20.

What is the reason you talk too much?

A key thought in this whole section is the possibility that some of us imagine ourselves to be religious while avoiding the disciplines that keep us from falling prey to "self-deception."

One characteristic of self-deception in the believer's life is an empty show of religious devotion. With strong language, James taught that such religion is worthless!

How would you define religion that is pure and faultless?

James used a graphic word, "pollution," to make his final point in this section about the contaminants of ungodly actions and attitudes that we allow into our lives. Why is the idea of pollution an appropriate word picture?

## 5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight?

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

# Don't Play Favorites

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, September 19, 2007

&ldquo;Don&rsquo;t Play Favorites&rdquo;

James 2:1-13

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Let&rsquo;s all be honest about ourselves tonight. We all have those we&rsquo;d prefer to hang out with and those we don&rsquo;t. Some of us would prefer to rub shoulders with the rich rather than the poor.

What kind of things make you favor one person more than another?

James lays it out here in no uncertain terms &ndash; &ldquo;Don&rsquo;t show favoritism.&rdquo; Favoritism is a complex sin &ndash; an evil &ndash; that is no small matter because it runs so counter to what Jesus Christ modeled in his life on earth and James knew our human tendency is prone to adopt such a point of view.

15 Minutes - DIG

Before you jump to the conclusion that one more time the Scriptures are slamming rich people. That&rsquo;s not the point. Who James is criticizing are those who react and salivate and stumble and fumble all over themselves to impress and hang out with the rich folks. The case study he gives makes this point!

You&rsquo;ve seen it happen. Why is this offensive to God? Why are we prone to show preferential treatment to those who have money?

What is the significance of James adding this thought to this conversation &ndash; &ldquo;have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?&rdquo; (v. 4)?

What are some results of showing favoritism (vv. 4, 6, 9, 13)?

What were the practices of the rich that drew particular fire from James (vv. 6-7)?

We are so prone to think the rich are on top and the poor are at the bottom. We often portray our belief that leaders are important and that servants are less. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is constantly talking about an upside-down kingdom &ndash;

• If you want to be great, you've got to become a \_\_\_\_\_;

• If you are weak, then you'll be \_\_\_\_\_;

• The poor will be \_\_\_\_\_;

• The first will be \_\_\_\_\_.

What two gifts does God give the poor (v. 5)? Why did James say the poor would be &ldquo;rich in faith&rdquo;?

What did James identify as being the &ldquo;royal law&rdquo; (v. 8)?

Most of us don't need another Bible study and more indoctrination. We need to put what we know into practice. We need to love our neighbor as ourselves.

How can the royal law guide out treatment of others in all circumstances of life?

James brings up two necessities in the closing verses in this section (vv. 12-13) that we'd prefer not to be included:

• Accountability;

• Judgment.

First he says our talk and walk must be congruent. We are going to be held accountable and judged by our words and actions.

God sends all types of people into our lives and He wants to see how we treat them. And James gives us the warning that God will show to us in the end the same kind of mercy that we showed to others.

Here is a list of four criteria by which we judge people:

- Achievement;
- Appearance;
- Ancestry;
- Age.

One day God asked Samuel to go and anoint the future king of Israel. Samuel went to the house of Jesse. Jesse had a whole bunch of sons, and naturally Samuel looked at the oldest one first. This oldest son, Eliab, had everything. He looked the part. But God told Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

What are some things we've got to learn to do to get past achievement, appearance, ancestry, and age as determining factors of our friendship with others rather than taking the time to learn what's on the inside?

When have you been hurt by favoritism?

Where are you most susceptible to discrimination?

As a disciple of Christ, how can you better show mercy this week? How merciful are you with your spouse? With your children? Around your office? With the cashier in the checkout line?

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Take time to think about the judgmental thoughts and words you have had this week. Confess them to God.

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

# Faith Without Works is Dead

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, October 3, 2007

&ldquo;Faith without Works Is Dead&rdquo;

James 2:14-26

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Chips and salsa. Peanut butter and jelly. Hamburgers and hotdogs. Microsoft and Bill Gates. We could all add to the list, pairing up things that just go together. James has one for us - faith and works. James says there is a relationship, a fiber that connects the two. And this connectivity is something we must understand if we are going to have a mature and authentic faith.

Remember the whole theme of the Book of James is maturity. If we don't get the connection between faith and works, we won't grow to be spiritually mature.

It is sort of ironic that when you read commentaries on this best known section, you learn this is one of the most controversial sections of James' letter. Wonder why that is? How could anyone question the spiritual connection between faith and works?

15 Minutes - DIG

It was Jesus who defamed the religious people of his day who "did not practice what they preach" (Mt. 23:3). It is no surprise that James arrived at the same conclusion that a faith that does not respond in good works is dead!

He is not here contrasting faith and works. Rather he is contrasting a faith which is active and a faith which is dead! Why does belief in God call for life change?

Without really giving a definition of "faith," James had already introduced this important concept in chapter 1:26 when he stated a man's religion was worthless if he couldn't bridle his tongue. In the very next verse (v. 27) he declares that "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

When James talked about what it really meant to be a person of faith — a religious person — he concluded that a person's faith should transform their actions. He assumed that "good" would come from our faith! Is that a proper assumption?

Now think about this before you just rattle off a resounding "yes." What is it about our faith that enables us to bridle our tongue? Or that enables us to get outside of ourselves and look after orphans and widows?

Apart from faith, would those be your automatic human responses? So what really is this faith that enables us to respond so differently to life's situations?

Don't see James' teaching here to be in contradiction to what the Apostle Paul taught in Romans chapters 2-4 and Ephesians 2:8 about our being saved by faith. Understand that James and Paul approached faith and works from different points of view. James saw faith and works in light of what God requires of those who have already become Christians, while Paul saw faith and works in light of what God requires for a person to become a Christian.

Why is a proper understanding that we are saved by grace release and empower us to be people "ready unto every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8; Gal. 6:9-10; Eph. 2:10; 1 Tim. 6:18; 2 Tim. 3:17; 1 Pet. 2:12)?

James says that even demons (those evil spirits under the influence of Satan) believe in the existence of God. What is James' point in referencing that "even demons believe" and shudder (v. 19)?

As evidence that faith alone is not enough, James brings up the stories of two people in the Old Testament who acted on their belief. One of them was the patriarch Abraham. His complete story is told in Genesis 22 and often referenced in other sections of scripture (Romans 4, Hebrews 11:8-19).

The other was Rahab, a prostitute. Her whole story is told in Joshua chapters 2 and 6. She owned some sort of hotel and when the Israelite spies came into Jericho, she put them up in her hotel, helped them escape, and kept the whole thing quiet. And for her decision, she is mentioned in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11 and even more important, she is part of the lineage of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:5)!

The patriarch was a Jew. The prostitute a Gentile. The patriarch had a track record with God and the prostitute had just made a faith decision. Each of them trusted God and acted on it.

What are the lessons from Abraham's and Rahab's examples?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

How does this link us back to James' instruction in 1:16, "He chose to give us birth through the word of

truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created”? In what ways should our “first fruits” (good deeds) verify our faith? If you were arrested for being a Christian, what evidence would be used to prove the point?

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight?

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

# Oh, The Power of Words!

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, October 10, 2007

&ldquo;Oh, the Power of our Words&rdquo;

James 3:1-12

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us would have to say that some of our biggest regrets have to do with hurtful words we have said. We wish we could recall those words, but we can&rsquo;t. The damage is done.

Conversely, some of our greatest joys can come from encouraging words we have heard others speak to us.

Isn&rsquo;t it ironic that words have the potential for great harm or for great good? In what camp do you find yourself most often?

15 Minutes - DIG

A horse has a wild nature. A horse wants to go his own way, but amazing enough, a bit in a horse&rsquo;s mouth can control this huge animal.

A small rudder is the instrument that steers a boat.

You know a small spark can start a huge forest fire.

Having given these three examples, James then says, &ldquo;Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it

makes great boasts . . . it is a world of evil among the parts of the body” (v. 5, 6).

What’s the point?

Some people are verbal arsonists. They strike a match - a little bit of slander; gossip; a verbal jab; a lie; or an insult &ndash; and oh the fire it starts! James calls all this “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v. 8).

Why are these attacks so evil and poisonous?

As if James hasn’t already called us out, he then speaks to the hypocrisy of one minute finding us praising God and then not a minute from the church house we are enraged by someone’s actions on the interstate and we are cursing them.

“Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be” (v. 10).

Why does James make light of the sinfulness of cursing someone with whom you are annoyed when we are in effect asking God to do something that He will not do?

“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (vv. 11-12).

Here is the point. Our tongue reveals our true person. It reveals our bitterness, volatility, selfishness, judgmental attitude, hateful spirit, evil thoughts, self-righteousness, hardness of heart, hypocrisy, etc. It reveals our spirituality or lack thereof (Mt. 12:33-37; 15:16-20; Lk. 6:43-45)!

It is intriguing why James starts off this section about taming the tongue with the warning that not many of us should presume to be teachers. Why do you think he starts in this way?

He intensifies this statement with this reasoning &ndash; “because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (v. 1).

What’s the point?

Once again James says, “We all stumble in many ways” (v. 2).

Some of us try to substitute words for works. Some talk all the time about spiritual matters, but when it comes to volunteering to help when called upon, there are some who never agree.

Listen to Paul's words on this subject:

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Colossians 4:6

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Ephesians 4:29-32

"But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practice and have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

Colossians 3:8-10

15 Minutes - REFLECT

Why is there such a close connection between the heart of a man and what comes out of his mouth (Ps. 34:12-14; 37:30; Prov. 10:20; 20:10)? Why is what we say the "real revealer" of our true spiritual maturity?

Does it trouble you at all that the kinds of things that have come out of your mouth this week reveal the work that still needs to be done in your life to get rid of the poison and corruption deep in your soul?

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight?

Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

## Two Kinds of Wisdom

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, October 17, 2007

&ldquo;Two Kinds of Wisdom&rdquo;

James 3:13-18

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Read the text together &ndash; James 3:13-18.

Describe someone you know that you would characterize as wise and understanding?

Can it be that our real quest in life can be so easily reduced down as to whether we spend most of our time pursuing &ldquo;worldly&rdquo; or &ldquo;Godly&rdquo; wisdom?

15 Minutes - DIG

Wisdom is something that is rated very highly in the Bible. It is mentioned over one hundred times in the Book of Proverbs and many more times in the rest of the Bible. And so we shouldn&rsquo;t be surprised to find James having something to say on this important subject. Wonder why?

Right living begins with right thinking.

Often, we mess up by confusing wisdom with knowledge.

Who from scripture do you remember for his wisdom? Here is what is said about Solomon&rsquo;s wisdom:

“God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore” (1 Kings 4:29).

Knowledge gives us all the data, all the facts, and we can recite them verbatim. Wisdom takes those facts, puts faith into them, and gives them feet.

Proverbs, the book of wisdom, says, “Wisdom is supreme; therefore, get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (Prov. 4:7). Job, who had some reason to know about this said, “the price of wisdom is beyond rubies” (Job. 28:18).

Wisdom is worth all you have, and true wisdom will bring humility. Wisdom is the power of knowledge applied, directed, and focused.

How can you tell the difference between someone who is wise and someone who is just knowledgeable?

There is a vast difference between Godly wisdom and worldly wisdom. Sometimes we want to have a little bit of worldly wisdom mixed in with the Godly wisdom, a little chaos with the control.

This will never do!

James even says that worldly wisdom is “of the devil” (v. 15). How do you react to this declaration?

James brings up two things that are signs of worldly wisdom:

- bitter envy;
- selfish ambition.

Of all the things he could have mentioned, why do you suppose he brings up these two worldly characteristics? What about these two attitudes stands in conflict with Godly wisdom?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. What does all this have to do with our own “boastings”?

Notice the harvest of worldly wisdom —

“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (v. 16).

How does this strike you?

Look closely at each of the descriptive terms that James uses to describe "the wisdom that comes from heaven" . . .

• . . . pure;

• . . . peace-loving;

• . . . considerate;

• . . . submissive;

• . . . full of mercy and good fruit;

• . . . impartial and sincere.

Look closely at these qualities one by one. Are they the qualities to which you have devoted your life? Why is the life filled with Godly wisdom so attractive?

And then James closes this section with this comment:

"Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."

What is it about a peacemaker that is so "central" to our being a follower of Jesus Christ?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

Take some time now to examine your heart.

Let's be honest tonight and talk about how all this squares with who we are at this point in our life.

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

In closing tonight, read Colossians 2:2-3.

In what situation do you need wisdom right now?

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

# A Holy War

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, October 24, 2007

&ldquo;A Holy War&rdquo;

James 4:1-10

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

There are three different wars that James introduces in this section:

- \* An internal war (we fight with ourselves);
- \* An external war (we fight with others);
- \* A Holy War (me versus God).

With that introduction, let&rsquo;s now read the text &ndash; James 4:1-10.

15 Minutes - DIG

James&rsquo; readers apparently were plagued by conflicts and disputes.

He identified the source of their conflicts as their &ldquo;desires&rdquo; (probably better translated &ldquo;cravings&rdquo;). Do these cravings parallel the twin evils listed in chapter 3:14 &ndash; bitter envy and selfish ambition?

James says these desires have the potential to lead to what? Why is that such a scary thought?

A starting place for tonight&rsquo;s discussion is to talk about the war that goes on inside of us.

Within our bodies there are feuding desires that cause internal war.

One desire that causes internal war is our desire to control. As long as things are going our way, everything is great. This internal conflict spills over into every relationship that we have.

Another desire that contributes to the war is covetousness. We have within our flesh the desire to possess stuff that we don't need and can't have.

What might be some other desires that cause internal war?

In contrast, James says we should deal with our desires by asking God for what we want (4:2-3). Why do we sometimes resist or hesitate to ask God for what we want?

James states that even our prayers reveal our determination to exercise our own will over God's. We ask with "\_\_\_\_\_ , that you may spend what you get on your \_\_\_\_\_" (4:3).

James addressed his readers harshly as "adulterous people" (v. 4). This term is especially used in the Old Testament and is synonymous with unfaithfulness. By making this correlation, James implied that his readers were having an "affair" with the world.

Describe in your own words the nature of this "affair with the world."

The root cause of all the wars we fight is pride. It is pride that causes us to be at battle with God, within ourselves, and with other people. If pride is so pervasive, what can we do to rid ourselves of such?

Read Deuteronomy 8:10-20.

James provided the antidote to spiritual adultery by quoting from Proverbs: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34).

Building on the foundation he laid in v. 6, James began a series of imperatives that span the next four verses. These commands, in effect, are his recipe for humility:

- \* Submit yourselves to God (this is a military term used to highlight a position on an organization chart);
- \* Resist the devil;

- \* Come near to God (we've got to relationally place ourselves next to God);
- \* Wash your hands and purify your hearts (we've got to deal seriously with sin).

#### 15 Minutes - REFLECT

If we are going to end all the battles and wars we fight, we will have to approach such from a position of weakness, not strength.

When was the last time you spent time on your face before the Lord? It gives you a different perspective. Miraculously when we humble ourselves before the Lord, God does some special things in our lives.

What keeps you from humbling yourself before the Lord?

#### 5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

Pray! Pray! Pray!

# A Proper Perspective on Life

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, November 7, 2007

&ldquo;A Proper Perspective on Life&rdquo;

James 4:11-17

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

How subtly we convince ourselves that we control our lives. What are specific ways that you have been trying to control your life?

Read James 4:11-17.

Before we get into the actual content of this section, what is the link you see between James&rsquo; instruction against slandering (vv.11-12) and the following section on &ldquo;boasting about tomorrow&rdquo; (vv.13-17)?

15 Minutes - DIG

Why is it that we try to build ourselves up by criticizing others?

How is this improper attitude toward others reflective of an improper attitude we have about ourselves . . . and even worse, of an improper attitude toward God?

To slander is to speak evil about another person in their absence and thus they are unable to defend themselves. Slander might come in the form of false accusation. Or it might just be harsh criticism. In what area of your life are you most at risk in speaking slander toward others?

When a person judges someone else, it is a violation of the royal law of love (2:8)! Why is this attitude and action so offensive to God?

Remember several weeks ago we discussed the problem of &ldquo;boasting&rdquo; and referenced it would come up again in this study. Well here it is again!

Boasting about what will happen tomorrow is another example of human arrogance. It is in the same category as judging others (vv. 11-12). Judgment is arrogant because God is the only legitimate judge. Boasting about the future is arrogant because God is the only one who knows what will happen in the future. Such arrogance is the opposite of humility, which is one of the primary virtues of a follower of Jesus Christ!

James lets us listen in on the plans of a group of businessmen. They are planning for the future and what are the four agendas on their mind (v. 13)?

- &bull; Where they will \_\_\_\_\_;
- &bull; How long they will \_\_\_\_\_;
- &bull; What they will \_\_\_\_\_;
- &bull; How much \_\_\_\_\_ they will make.

In contrast to prayerful planning, James uses these businessmen who represent all those who are very proud of what they do on their own. James is not condemning international trade or the wealth it brings. What he is concerned about is the one who does all this in a spirit of boastful arrogance without giving any credit to God&rsquo;s provisions in his life.

To contrast that worldview, what is James&rsquo; perspective on life and what is his caution against adopting the worldly approach to life that he describes in this section (vv. 13-17)?

Read Luke 12:16-21.

I&rsquo;ve often wondered why James closes this section with these words in v. 17?

&ldquo;Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn&rsquo;t do it, sins.&rdquo;

How does this relate to the previous section?

- &bull; Did he just out of the blue throw this in as a shot against what we call &ldquo;sins of omission&rdquo;?
- &bull; Might this somehow be linked to a specific failure of the businessmen in the earlier verses? If so, what might that be? The key to understanding this might be the thought, &ldquo;who knows the good he ought to do. . .&rdquo;
- &bull; So does this mean they were failing in their charitable duty to the poor?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

James makes a strong case throughout his letter (and especially in this section) that there is one norm by which the life of faith is to be lived out &ndash; &ldquo;if God wills.&rdquo;

There are five things the Bible says about the will of God. When we have these five things down, we will better understand the will of God for our lives:

- &bull; It is God&rsquo;s will for us to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9);
- &bull; We are to be spirit-filled people (Eph. 5:17-18);
- &bull; We are to be sanctified (1 Thes. 4:3);
- &bull; We must submit to God (James 4:6-7);
- &bull; We are to serve (Mt. 20:26-28).

The hunger to be significant is a dominant drive that God placed within the heart of each one of us. It was God&rsquo;s intent for this hunger to be satisfied by living in covenant relationship &ndash; first with Him and then in relationship with others that He places in our lives.

It was never his intent for our significance to be found through worldly pursuits and stuff. That&rsquo;s the reason James says, &ldquo;As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil&rdquo; (v. 16).

DON&rsquo;T MISS THIS POINT. The hunger to be significant can destroy us. If you don&rsquo;t believe it, take a quick look at what happened to Saul after David killed Goliath (1 Samuel 18:5-10).

We long to have significance in this world and for someone to take notice of us. Let that be found in Jehovah God! Everything else is empty and hollow!

With all this being said, life can be reduced down to a very simple question &ndash; What is eternal life?

&ldquo;Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only

True God, and Jesus Christ, who you have sent&rdquo; (John 17:3).

Everything else is empty and hollow!

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

Pray! Pray! Pray!

# Warning to Rich Oppressors

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, November 14, 2007

&ldquo;Warning to Rich Oppressors&rdquo;

James 5:1-6

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Read the text for tonight &ndash; James 5:1-6.

What feelings rise in you as you read this? Why?

15 Minutes - DIG

Just as we anticipated, James now comes back to the subject of wealth (his previous treatment of such are 1:10-11 and 2:3-6). Of all the New Testament passages about sins of the rich, these six verses stand out! Keep in mind that James was writing during a time where there was a great gulf between the rich and the poor.

Here James expressed anger against the rich because of the way they had treated the poor and less fortunate.

What did he predict would happen to these people?

Have you ever noticed that James warns rich people to expect misery? James wanted us to know that wealth doesn&rsquo;t bring security and contentment.

From the three indictments against the rich, what do you learn about the source of their wealth and what is the calamity predicted from their respective enterprise (vv. 2-3)?

With these illustrations, James made a statement that amassing and trusting in wealth is a damaging and degrading attitude (Mt. 13:22; Mk. 4:19; Lk. 8:14; 12:21; 1 Tim. 6:9).

When do we cross the line of saving and investing our money appropriately and fall prey to "hoarding our wealth"?

What is the bigger crisis that the rich will face in the future?

James gets very specific as he details just how it was that these folks were able to accumulate their wealth. What were the three abuses they had committed (vv. 4-6)?

15 Minutes - REFLECT

What is the message here for our time and culture?

Apply James's principles to our times as it relates to . . .

• What are the distinguishing marks of someone who is materialistic and who has crossed the line into a life of self-indulgence?

• As a business owner, what does it mean to be an equal opportunity employer? What are the appropriate standards of sharing wealth with all the employees of your company? Why is it wrong to accumulate wealth at the expense of others?

• What is our responsibility as Christians (and collectively, as the church) to deal with poverty in our city?

## A CASE STUDY

A youth minister at one of the area churches took a group of teens to Haiti where they worked among some of the poorest people in the world. After a week of endearing themselves to these people, the teens were appalled by the poverty and social injustice they saw. On their return trip home, all the teens agreed they had to look for ways to help these poor people and they shared ideas about what they could do from afar that would make a difference. They decided they would organize an annual mission trip back to Haiti and they would raise funds during the year to purchase goods and supplies to take with them as well as to give money to every poor family to buy what they needed.

On a completely different front, because of the embarrassment they felt for how the American corporations were taking advantage of the cheap workforce in Haiti, they vowed to boycott the products manufactured by these corporations and

they developed petitions to send to these corporate headquarters voicing their criticism. One evening one of the teens approached one of the leaders in their church to have him sign the petition only to find out he was on the Board of Directors of one of these companies.

• When our teens travel to foreign countries on mission trips, do you as a parent want your teen to be moved to take action in response to what they have seen and experienced? If so, to what degree?

• Did the teens in this case study go too far in deciding to send petitions to the American corporations who they felt were exploiting the poor people of Haiti?

• What should the teenager say to this leader in his church upon learning of his participation in one of these companies? Did the teenager have the right to express his opinion / concern to this person?

• What would be the proper reaction this leader should have when confronted with this concern?

• Is it acceptable to have a difference in opinion about such a matter? Or is there something un-Christian about what these corporations were doing in Haiti?

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

Pray! Pray! Pray!

# Be Patient and Stand Firm

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, November 28, 2007

&ldquo;Be Patient and Stand Firm&rdquo;

James 5:7-12

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Slowly read the text and note the key phrases and words.

We don&rsquo;t like pain and suffering. We&rsquo;d like to escape it, but the reality is that trouble and heartache is just a part of living here on planet earth. The big question is how to deal with the pain and suffering that comes our way!

James gives us an answer that at first glance seems shallow. He just says, &ldquo;Be patient.&rdquo;

Patience? Have you noticed this is a place where your faith in God gets tested?

15 Minutes - DIG

How have you noticed that as you bear through the trials you have faced with patience that God worked within you and matured you into His likeness?

With many of his readers being agrarian laborers, James&rsquo; reference to a farmer would have been a very appropriate illustration. What are some of the reasons you can identify that make farming a profession that demands patience?

Would you do well as a farmer?

Through all of the sufferings and trials that we endure through life, what is the one thing that we are waiting for (v. 7)? Why should we live our life with a greater anticipation of the Lord's coming?

Why do you think in this section that James makes a point that amidst the trials we face we should keep in mind not only the Lord's Second Coming (vv. 7-8) but also the fact that He is also beside us right now (v. 9)?

How does impatience lead to grumbling and complaining about our circumstances . . . or about the actions of others? Are you a grumbler?

James's reference in this section of the patience and perseverance of the prophets and Job serve as worthy of our imitation. Take a minute and look at how God blessed Job in the end with far more than he had at the beginning of his trials (Job 42:10-17).

The central message is that those who persevere will be blessed by God &ndash; &ldquo;the Lord who is full of compassion and mercy&rdquo; (v. 11).

And then there is a command in verse 12 that we don't give much attention &ndash; &ldquo;Above all, my brothers, do not swear &ndash; not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your &lsquo;Yes&rsquo; be yes, and your &lsquo;No&rsquo; no, or you will be condemned.&rdquo;

Note the emphasis James places on these two points:

&bull; &ldquo;Above all . . .&rdquo;;

&bull; &ldquo;. . . or you will be condemned&rdquo; &ndash; meaning to ignore such comes with stiff consequences;

So what exactly is swearing?

In times of distress, Christians can easily use God's name in a careless and irreverent way. There is no doubt that James is warning against such, but probably the bigger issue is that of taking an oath to guarantee a promise. It seems his primary point is to call Christians to a standard of truthfulness and tongue control that just saying &ldquo;yes&rdquo; or &ldquo;no&rdquo; is a binding promise, a guarantee of truth. Several times in James's letter he made the point that there is no room for careless, half-baked talk, or promises unfulfilled.

15 Minutes - REFLECT

How would you sum up this passage in one sentence?

James's instruction in verse 8, &ldquo;Be patient and stand firm . . .&rdquo; seems to be the central message of

this section. While we've given most of our attention in this discussion to the idea of patience, describe in your own words what it means to "stand firm."

Describe some ways that you have seen God bless your life through your perseverance through some significant trial in your life.

5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

Pray! Pray! Pray!

# The Prayer of Faith

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Wednesday Night, December 12, 2007

&ldquo;The Prayer of Faith&rdquo;

James 5:13-20

5 Minutes - Welcome / Prayer

5 Minutes - OPEN

Read the text for tonight.

Why should the church have a &ldquo;holistic approach&rdquo; to ministry to people? Describe in your own words what it means to become whole.

15 Minutes - DIG

Throughout this letter, James has spoken candidly about the suffering that believers will experience. Here he says, &ldquo;is any one of you in trouble? He should pray.&rdquo;

Why is prayer a proper response to trouble?

Is this prayer to be offered in private? Or is it to be offered with other believers (when the church gathers)?

James then posed a second question, &ldquo;Is anyone happy?

Times of happiness are a blessing from God. What is the proper response for these times &ndash; &ldquo;Let him sing songs of praise.&rdquo;

Is this song that we sing to be done in private? Or is it to be sung with other believers (when the church gathers)?

And then a third question, "any one of you sick?"

What kind of sickness do you think James was referring to —

- physical;
- emotional;
- mental;
- spiritual;
- or all.

For those of us who believe God does heal today, the question becomes how does he go about it? James gives some specific instructions:

• First of all, the one who is sick has to ask for help and James's instruction is to involve the elders of the church. The elders are instructed to anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord.

• What is the purpose of using oil? While it is true that olive oil was often used for medicinal purposes (Luke 10:34; Mark 6:12-14), more important is the application of the oil "in the name of the Lord" because herein the Spirit of God gets involved!

• And the elders's prayer must be offered in faith. What is the belief the elders should have when offering this prayer?

- That God can heal this person.
- Submitting this concern to God and trusting that He knows what is best.
- That God will show up in this situation.
- Any other ideas?

James described the prayer of the true believer as being "powerful and effective." Have you found this to be true? If so, share some examples of such with your LIFE Group.

James used an Old Testament example to illustrate effective prayer. Elijah prayed and God withheld rain from the earth for three and one-half years. Then God sent rain again at Elijah's request (1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-42).

15 Minutes - REFLECT

There are two different approaches people take to faith healing that interferes with a proper understanding of James's teaching on faith healing.

- The first we'll call the sensationalist approach. These are the healers who advertise healing sessions, who pack coliseums with people looking for miracles on demand.

- A second approach to healing says that it only happened in the past.

With this perspective, some of us never even think of asking for divine healing. Why?

How closely are physical health and spiritual health connected? Why do you think James includes in this section the importance of confession of sins?

James continued his instruction on prayer by telling his readers that their entire church should be characterized by mutual confession of sin.

How is it that mutual confession leads to prayer for each other?

At the very heart of the life and work of the church is restoration of the fallen, the finding of the lost, and the saving of sinners.

It is the nature of human beings to stray from God's way, to "miss the mark" that God has established for us, and to turn from the path that He has prescribed for us.

To anyone willing, the way back to God and to life is to turn from "the error of his way" to save one's soul from "death and cover over a multitude of sins" (v. 20).

Are you involved in this kind of ministry?

#### 5 Minutes - CLOSING PRAYER

From this discussion, what are those things you feel compelled to pray about tonight? Pray about these matters one by one and bring them before your Heavenly Father.

Pray! Pray! Pray!