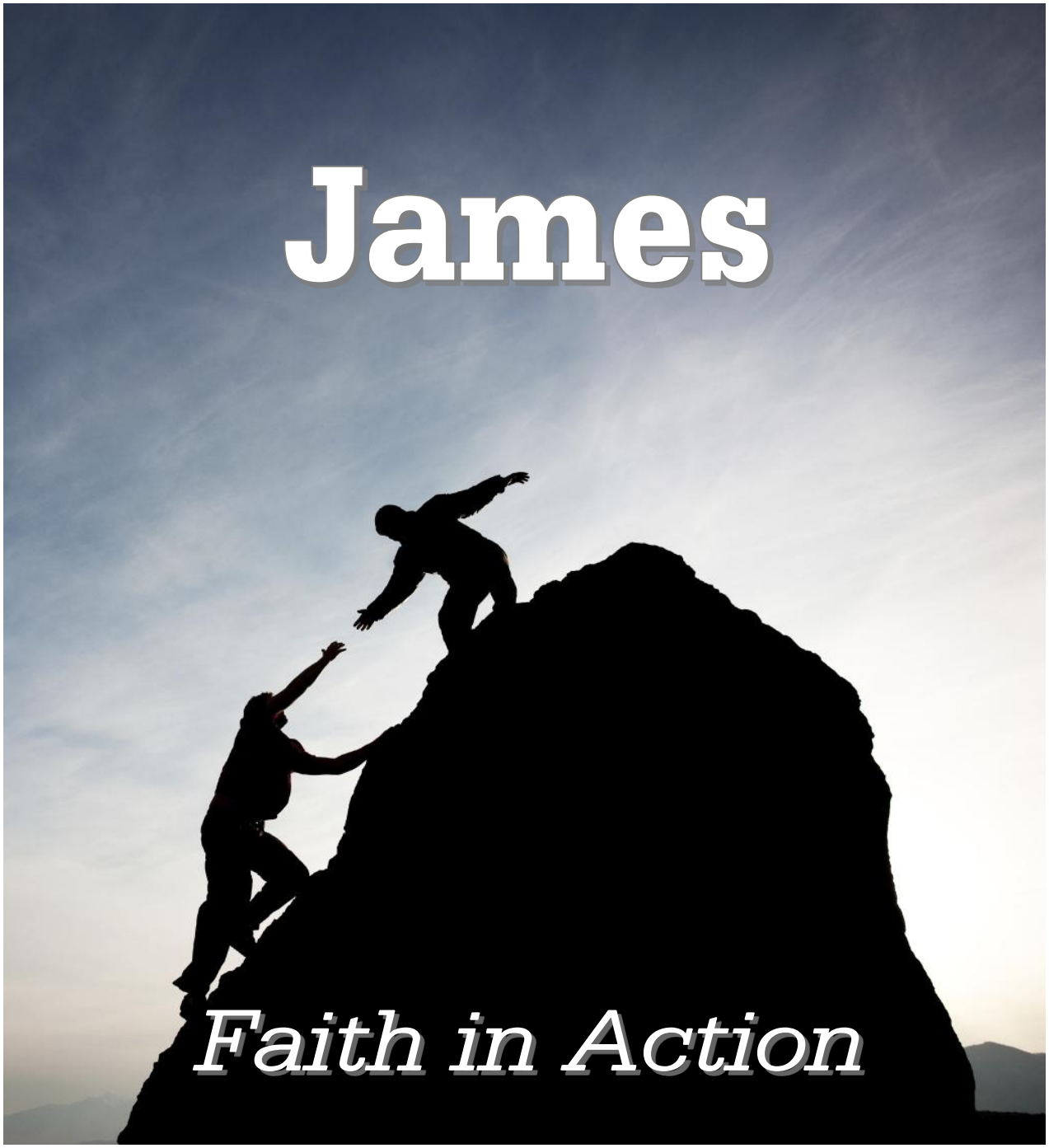

Bible Studies for Ashfield Presbyterian Church

ashfieldpresbyterian.org.au

Introduction:

James is practical—maybe too practical! So expect these studies to be challenging—not because they will be hard to understand but because they will be all too *easy* to understand.

There is a lot more to James, however, than snippets of good advice. James may seem to be very disjointed – just a general collection of wise sayings. But there is a basic theme that ties the whole book together. James was not just writing a little handbook of sayings. He was applying God's wisdom to common difficulties in Christian living. James teaches that true knowledge of God is much more than knowing facts about him, for if you do not put that knowledge into action, you do not really know God at all.

Who is this fellow James? There are several people in the New Testament called James, including two apostles. Though they have never been completely certain, most church scholars have believed that a third man, James the brother of Jesus (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3), wrote this letter. While he probably joined the others in Jesus' family in rejecting Jesus during his earthly ministry, James certainly started following Jesus after his resurrection. In fact, James soon became the head of the church in Jerusalem.

He probably led the first church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) that decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before they could be saved. This is an important factor in assessing James's view of faith and works (which is to be noted in light of 2:14-16).

James addresses his letter to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." "Twelve tribes" could refer to Jewish Christians who through exile, enslavement and trade were spread throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. More likely it refers simply to Christians, since the New Testament compares the church to Israel (Gal 6:16 RSV; 1 Pet 2:9-10). In any case, the letter is not addressed to one specific congregation, as Paul's letters were. It is therefore called a general, or catholic, epistle.

These studies will help you face squarely James's call for a consistent Christian life, for a practical faith—faith in action.

James 1:1-18: Acting in adversity

Seeing the Big Picture

Surveying a book like James allows you to grasp the big picture and the overall storyline of the book before getting caught up in the details. This survey provides a helpful road map to guide your study during the coming weeks. Begin this crucial first step by reading straight through James without stopping. Then, answer the questions below before moving on

1. How would you describe James' audience? Are they believers or unbelievers? Are they spiritually mature or immature? What issues are they facing?

2. What are the major themes or big ideas in this book? (Hint: look for repeated words and ideas.)

3. Now that you have read through the entire book, what are James' purposes in writing it? Be as specific as you can.

4. What do you notice about the style, language, and structure of this book? What other books of Scripture does James remind you of? Why?

Investigate:

Now go back and look at 1:1-18.

Note: The same Greek word is translated as trial in v2 and 12, and temptation (or tempt as a verb) in v13 and 14.

5. Why can the Christian approach trials joyfully?

   Is there a difference between joy and happiness?

6. How are perseverance and maturity developed in us by enduring trials (vv. 3-4)?

   Are there only some types of trials that God can use in this way?

7. What were some of the trials James' readers were facing?

   1:9-11

   2:1-7

   2:15-16

   4:1-8

   5:1-6

   5:8-11

8. Note the repetition of the idea of "lacking" in v4 and 5. Can you see a connection between the two verses?

9. Under the pressure of trials, how does the faithful Christian (described in vv. 5-6) contrast with the person described in verses 6-8?

10. In the context of trials and perseverance, why does James contrast rich and poor Christians (vv. 9-11)?

11. What difficult experiences have increased your perseverance and maturity?

12. How is God described in this passage? How do these descriptions encourage and strengthen you as you face trials?

    5

    12

    13

    17

13. Think about the following practical situations. Add a situation you are currently facing. Where does the temptation to sin lie in each? How might God use them to make you mature and complete?

Situation	Temptation to sin	How God might use it to mature you
Sickness		
Unemployment		
Loneliness		

Prayer Points:

Talk to God about your needs. Ask him to help you be like him in his goodness and dependability. Pray that God would give you the wisdom to meet them with joy.

James 1:19-27: Just do it!

1. **Read James 1:19-27.** What connection can you see between the start of this section and the end of the previous one?

2. What has God done for our salvation (v19-21 compare v18)?

3. What should be our response (v19-22)?

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

5. In what situations do you find yourself quick to speak and quick to become angry?

   What sinful attitude might be behind that impulse?

   How can you change your behaviour in these situations?

6. James tells us that God's Word was planted in us. What weeds can choke that Word and keep it from growing (v. 21)? Explain.

   How do we work out in practice humbly accepting the word?

   What is the opposite of this?

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

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

9. Who are the "widows and orphans" or other lonely or needy people in church, or around it? How can you help them?

10. In what areas are you tempted to being polluted by the world? What strategies can you use to resist this temptation?

11. When is it hard for you to listen to God?

12. Do your Bible reading habits need improvement? What are some of the different ways we can read the Bible?

13. Sometimes we do listen to God's Word, but we still don't follow it. How is this true for you?

14. What steps could you take to make sure you put into practice what you hear or read in the Bible?

15. Think of what you were struggling with as a Christian this time last year. Have you made any progress?

Prayer Points:
Ask God to help you become a better listener and doer of his Word.

James 2:1-13: The Foolishness Of Favouritism

Labels aren't just found on soup cans. We put them on people all the time. Funny or dull. Smart or thick-headed. Friendly or cold. There are all kinds of ways we can categorize people. And our categories can have a profound influence on the way we treat people. As you might suspect, James has a few words to say about favouritism.

1. Read James 1:22-2:13. What is said about the law (1:25; 2:12)? How is it summed up (2:8)?

   How is showing favouritism contradictory to this?

2. What is wrong with treating the rich better than the poor?

Reading the background article on the rich and poor in New Testament Judea, then answer the questions following it:

Background Article on Wealth and Poverty in the Ancient World

from *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP)

In the first-century Palestinian world there were essentially two major groups of people, the rich and the poor. The rich included especially the wealthy high-priestly clans. Consisting of four extended families, they must be distinguished from the lower clergy (e.g., Zachariah of Luke's birth narrative) who were in general poor and felt oppressed by the high-priestly group. It was the chief priests who not only profited from the sacrifices offered in the Temple (the lower clerk officiated for only two weeks a year, while the high-priestly clans were always present) but also controlled the considerable commerce associated with that sacrifice and other religious activities (e.g., the activity noted in Mk 11:15-19).

Another wealthy group was the Herodian family and retinue, whose political power was easily translated into wealth. It has been estimated that Herod and later his family may have owned more than half the land in his dominions. Gifts of land to faithful followers were not unusual. The third group of wealthy people were the remnants of the older Jewish aristocracy (although much of their land was confiscated by Herod and his sons) and individuals who had become rich through trade, tax farming or the like. To be considered truly rich one had to own land, so a person would purchase landholdings as he became wealthy, but such a person would not farm his own land. Instead, he rented it to tenant farmers and spent much of his time on civic and religious affairs in the city (principally, Jerusalem). This system led to the abuse of tenants and hired labourers. This mistreatment was seen by wealthy as perfectly legal, but was viewed by the poor as totally unjust (cf. Jas 5:1-6).

A final group of wealthy people were the prosperous merchants who had not yet joined the land-owning aristocracy, although like them they controlled much of the economic life of the country. Both the land-owning and non-land-owning groups were deeply resented by the people of the land. It was no accident that during the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-70, when the common people got the upper hand in Jerusalem, one of their first acts was the burning of the debt records and the slaughter of many of the aristocrats. …[All four wealthy] groups at times used their power to oppress the lower classes. The less religious group[s] did it through sheer abuse of power. The observant group[s] justified their oppression through legal interpretation, which who in the eyes of Jesus was viewed as more culpable, for it appeared to put God on the side of injustice.

Although there was a small middle class of some of the skilled artisans, land-owning farmers and merchants (and socially, although not economically, the lower clergy), the second major social group was the poor, the peasants, the "people of the land." This group included several sub-groups.

The best-off were the small landowners, who tended to lead a precarious life which depended on the harvest. A bad year or two could spell the loss of their land to the wealthy neighbour who lent them seed after the first crop failure. It could also mean the starvation of their family. The tenant farmers were next best-off, although they had to pay their landlord his due before providing for their own families. Worst off were those without land (and without the skills of artisans), the hired labourers and the beggars. They were the truly poor. Their hand-to-mouth existence was considered hardly worth living. Mixed in among these various levels of poorer people were such trades as fishermen and carpenters, whose social level depended on their relative prosperity, even though they were landless. Zebedee, for example, appears to have been relatively prosperous, for he had hired men on his boats, not simply family. Jesus' family, on the other hand, offered the

sacrifice of the poor when he was born (Lk 2:24), but it is possible that when established back in Galilee they may have had a higher (if still modest) standard of living, which skilled work could at times command.

…However defined, the poor lived on the edge of existence even in the best of times, for to be in an agricultural economy without owning sufficient productive land to provide security is to be economically marginal. Yet the first century was not the best of times. Even if they managed to scrape by in normal years, the first century included years of famine, especially in the 40's. This threat could never be far from any of the poorer people. Then there were Roman (or Herodian) taxes to pay and on top of that the Law prescribed a tithe (which could amount to from seventeen to twenty-three per cent of one's gross income).

…Judaism in general did not have any problem with wealth. Possessions were not viewed as evil. Indeed, because of the OT stories of Abraham, Solomon and Job, there was a tendency to connect wealth with the blessing of God (the piety-prosperity equation), but while for the most part this attitude continued in the first century, it was modified in two directions. On the one hand, the empirical observation was made that wealth tended to beget greed and the abuse of power. And in a society in which the supply of wealth was believed to be limited, any gathering of wealth which was not clearly from God was suspected of being done through such abuse. In fact, in the light of the experience of the righteous under the Seleucid rulers and later the Hasmoneans and Herods, it even appeared that most wealth was gained by injustice and that righteousness tended to make one poor. Some intertestamental writers questioned if there were any wealthy people who were righteous (Sir 31:3-10). On the other hand, the same authors made it clear that a wealthy person could be righteous or honourable (especially if the wealth had been inherited) and the way that he or she could demonstrate this righteousness was through charity. Thus in Jewish tradition Abraham and Job were singled out as being wealthy persons who were righteous because they excelled in generosity.

3. How were the divisions between the rich and poor different than they are in Australia today?

4. Why would church leaders in James' day have been tempted to give preferential treatment to the rich?

5. While some needy people appear to be poor, God has actually made them 'rich in faith' (2:5). What does their 'wealth' consist of (see also 2 Cor 6:10; 8:7)?

6. What is James' point in v5-7 about the poor being rich in faith, while the rich are those who exploit his readers?

7. Verse 5 says God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. Is God guilty of showing favouritism in this way? Explain.

8. In what sense is it breaking the royal law to show favouritism?

9. What should our attitude be towards the rich and the poor (see also 1:9-11)?

10. How can breaking the law at one point mean you have broken all of it (2:9-11)?

11. In what sense does the law give freedom (2:12)?

12. What is the connection between showing mercy and not showing favouritism (2:13)?

13. Toward what people or groups do you show favouritism? How can you change your attitude and actions?

14. How can we, as a church, show practically that we love and don't show favouritism?

Prayer Points:
Ask God to work in your heart and mind to help you see beneath the surface as you relate to people.

James 2:14-26: Faith That Doesn't Work Doesn't Work

"It is easier said than done" is a cliché that certainly applies to our Christian life. It is much easier to talk about God than to obey him. James said that even the demons believe there is one God. But that certainly does not make them Christians! That's why someone can have all his or her doctrine perfectly straight and still have missed out on God's will. James helps us stay on target.

1. Read James 2:14-26. How does James describe so-called 'faith' (2:14, 17, 26)?

2. What is the point of the illustration in 2:15-16?

3. Can you think of some examples of your own failure to have real faith?

4. How does James answer the objection "You have faith; I have deeds" (vv. 18-19)?

5. James gives two Old Testament examples of faith in action. The first is the familiar story of God testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham obeyed but was stopped by an angel at the last minute. How was Abraham's faith made complete by what he did (vv. 21-24)?

6. The second Old Testament example is Rahab, the prostitute who hid two Israelite spies sent to Jericho before Israel's attack. How did Rahab's belief affect her (v. 25)?

7. How does James's closing analogy (2:26) summarize his teaching on faith and actions?

This passage has caused disagreement for centuries because of the way James emphasises the need for works in order to be saved. It sounds like he is contradicting the Biblical truth that we are saved by faith, and not by works (Eph 2:8-9). For example, if we take the following two verses in isolation, it might appear that they are contradicting each other

James 2:24 You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

But does James have the same definition for these key ideas as Paul?

8. Compare what James and Paul mean by faith/belief and works from the following passages

	James	Paul
Faith/belief	2:18-19	Rom 3:25; 4:3,5,18
Works	2:14-17	Rom 3:27-28; 4:2, 10-12

The two passages are addressing different questions. James is continuing his emphasis from Ch 1 that simply hearing God's word counts for little. Only those who put it into practice have a true and living faith. Paul, on the other hand, is addressing those who seek to justify themselves before God by performing the works of the Old Testament law. He teaches that this can never save, and that only by trusting the work of Jesus on our behalf can we be made right. Later in Romans, Paul speaks about how trust in God is expressed in a changed lifestyle (Romans 6:11-14; 8:1-14)

9. Can you summarise how the two ideas come together into one truth?

10. Read Eph 2:8-10. What does this contribute to the question?

11. How do your actions demonstrate the reality of your faith?

12. In what ways can you bring your actions more in line with your beliefs?

13. How can we do better at this as a church?

Prayer Points:
Ask God to help you follow through with the works that will reveal your true faith.

James 3:1-12: Preventing Bushfires

One of the most distressing crises is a fire out of control. The pain of seeing the destruction can be almost unbearable. Personal belongings going up in smoke. The beauty of nature destroyed. Even loss of life itself. In this passage James compares the destructive power of the tongue to that of a forest fire.

Why does this matter?

Liz had only been a believer in Jesus Christ for the last two years, yet so much of her life had already changed for the better. God had dramatically transformed her behaviour and priorities. And yet there was one relic of her former life that remained much the same as it had always been: her speech. Liz was blessed with a sharp mind and a razor wit. Though not the most popular or pretty girl in school, Liz had learned to use her humour and sarcasm to earn the respect (and even fear) of her peers. She fine-tuned this ability through college and during her early years in the professional world. Though she was now a follower of Christ, Liz was hesitant to turn this area of her life over to Him. She loved the popularity that her quick wit and hilarious sarcasm brought to her in the office among her friends. Her words were never cruel; just humorous pokes and jabs for the sake of laughter. If people ever felt hurt by her words, surely it was their problem, not hers. It was just humour after all. They shouldn't take it so seriously.

Or so Liz believed, until she overheard a conversation between her coworkers that opened her eyes to the harm that speech can do. After praying for two weeks for courage to invite her coworker Amy to church and finding an opportunity to invite her just yesterday, Liz was completely unprepared to overhear Amy say to a coworker, "Can you believe Liz actually goes to church? No way. Is this another one of her jokes? She's the funniest, toughest, meanest woman in this office. When she comes in the room, I'm just hoping her wit's going to fall on someone other than me. I can't see any 'church' in her!"

1. We grew up hearing that, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." yet nothing could be further from the truth. What are some ways our words can be harmful to others?

2. While most people know that sinful speech, such as sarcasm, lying, and gossip can do great harm, all three of these are common in our society. Why is that? Why do people commit these destructive sins?

3. Read James 3:1-12. James compares the tongue (the words we speak) to a bit and a rudder (vv. 3-4). Why do you think the tongue has such control over our lives?

4. Why do teachers receive stricter judgment?

5. James also compares the tongue to a fire and to a world of evil (vv. 5-6). What is the point of these two comparisons?

6. How does the tongue defile the rest of our body? See also Matthew 15:17-20.

7. Why is it so difficult for us to "tame the tongue"? What is the ultimate source of the difficult problem we have with our tongues? (See Matthew 15:16-20.)

8. In what ways can the tongue poison people and relationships?

9. In verses 9-12 James uses a series of analogies from nature (springs, trees, vines). How do they highlight the inconsistencies of the tongue?

10. What damage has your tongue done recently?

11. What in this text gives you added strength and motivation to be more careful with your words?

12. What can you do to give God more praise? Be specific.

13. How can you give more affirmation to those you come in contact with each day?

Prayer Points:
Ask God to help you to be self-controlled about the ways that you speak to others.

James 3:13-4:12: The Fight

Why do people who love each other the most often fight the most too? Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters—it's all too common. James offers a valuable remedy for this sickness.

Envy Went to Church

Envy went to church this morning.
Being Legion, he sat in every other pew.
Envy fingered wool and silk fabrics,
Hung price tags on suits and neckties.
Envy paced through the parking lot
Scrutinizing chrome and paint.
Envy marched to the chancel with the choir
During the processional…
Envy prodded plain-jane wives
And bright wives married to milquetoast dullards,
Any kind men married to knife-tongued shrews.
Envy thumped at widows and widowers,
Jabbed and kicked college girls without escorts,
Lighted invisible fires inside khaki jackets.
Envy conferred often this morning
With all of his brothers;
He liked his Sunday score today
But not enough:
Some of his intended clients
Had sipped an antidote marked Grace,
And wore a holy flower named Love.

Elva McAllaster, *Christian Life*, January 1970

1. As the poem indicates envy can tempt us in many ways. What areas does this poem highlight?

2. What things are you tempted to envy (possessions, physical attributes, benefits in life, relationships, etc.)?

3. How does envy among believers affect our relationships with one another?

4. **Read James 3:13-4:3**. How is real wisdom revealed?

5. Fill out the table

	False 'wisdom'	True wisdom
Where it comes from		
Its character		
Its results		

6. Are you growing in wisdom? What signs are there to tell you?

7. **Read James 4:1-10.** What ideas link 3:13-18 with 4:1-3?

8. What does James say is necessary to come to God in prayer? (vv. 3-10)?

9. As you look at 4:3, what might be examples of right and wrong motives in your prayer?

10. What does James mean by "pleasures" in 4:1,3? Is he saying that it is always wrong to experience pleasure? What is he saying is actually wrong? Why would James describe this as adultery? Defend your answer from Scripture. (Hint: look up Luke 8:14 and 1 Peter 2:11)

11. Verse 5 is remarkably difficult to understand. No verse in the Old Testament matches it, so it is uncertain where James is quoting from. Furthermore, two very different translations are possible. "Spirit" could refer to the Holy Spirit, in which case the quote should be translated "He jealousy desires the Holy Spirit which He made to dwell in us." But "spirit" could also refer to the fallen, sinful "spirit" within all human beings that God has allowed to endure since the Fall of humanity. This option leads to the translation, "The spirit that God caused to dwell within us has an envious yearning," referring to the sinful lusts dwelling within us. Which translation do you prefer, and why?

    Using your preferred translation, how does this verse fit into the rest of the passage – what point is James making here?

12. What does it mean to be humble, to submit to God (vv.6-7)?

13. In verses 7-10 James gives several suggestions for humbling ourselves before God. How does each contribute to a humble spirit?

    What does it mean in practice to humble yourself before God?

14. Why does James say we shouldn't slander or speak against a Christian brother or sister (vv. 11-12)?

15. How can a proper attitude toward God (v. 12) enable us to have a proper attitude toward others?

16. Are you currently in conflict with any other believer? What can you do this week to begin to reconcile with this person?

17. What changes are you going to make to your prayer life in response to this study?

Prayer Points:

Take a few minutes to quietly humble yourself before God. Ask him to help you become a peacemaker.

James 4:13-5:11: Wealth and Poverty

"I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul." How subtly we convince ourselves that we control our lives. Sometimes only a crisis or even death itself convinces us otherwise. If we are truly wise and humble, we will listen carefully when James says, "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

1. Read James 4:13-17. How would you describe the two attitudes toward the future found in verses 13-17?

2. If our life is like a mist, what should be our attitude toward tomorrow?

3. If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how would your attitude toward life today be different?

4. What future plans do you often dwell on?

5. In what area of your life do you need to turn your plans over to God's will?

6. According to v17, what should we add to the common definition given to the word "sin – to do something which violates God's law"?

Why does this matter?

"How could they have promoted Tom over me?" lamented Keith. The two had been close competitors at their firm for the last three years. While Keith consistently lived by his Christian convictions, Tom unscrupulously did whatever it took to beat him out of sales, out o clients, and now, out of a promotion. Time and time again, Keith worked diligently to build a relationship with a company only to see Tom rush in and steal the contract from under him. Whether by manipulation, bribery, or sheer charisma, Tom had amassed an impressive string of contracts. Last year, his cutthroat tactics had earned him the Mercedes sedan his firm offered to its top performer. This year, it earned a coveted promotion. Keith and others in the sales force had reported Tom's dubious behaviour to their bosses on numerous occasions, and yet today's promotion announcement demonstrated once and for all that what really matters to the powers-that-be is not ethics, but profit. Keith left the office dejected and confused. Hadn't God promised to bless those who honour Him? Didn't He promise to judge sin? If so, then why was Keith leaving work in a ten-year-old economy car while a dishonest and arrogant man like Tom drove off in his Mercedes to celebrate his new promotion?

7. Name a time in your life when you saw unethical behaviour rewarded or righteous behaviour unrewarded. How did it make you feel? Why?

8. In the case study above, what would you say to encourage Keith after this particularly rough day?

9. Read James 5:1-11. How does this passage relate to 4:13-17? What similarities do you see?

10. James declares that misery awaits rich people. What crimes have they committed (vv. 1-6)?

11. Is James condemning all rich people? Explain.

12. James goes on to give three examples of patient people: a farmer, the prophets and Job. How is each an example of patience?

13. What different reactions would you expect the rich and those who suffer to have to the prospect of the Lord's return (vv. 7-9)?

14. How is piling up riches the opposite of patience that waits in faith for God to provide?

15. When are you tempted to hoard rather than to give and wait on God?

16. In what areas of your life are you impatient?

17. Many of us are relatively wealthy or will become wealthy in the future. What principles have you learned from the book of James that guide how you should grow and use your wealth in a way that honours God?

18. Regardless of how wealthy you are, what can you do this month with your money to honour God and bless your brothers in Christ?

Prayer Points

Ask God to help you love those around you rather than judge them. Humbly commit your future plans to the Lord. Pray that God would make you a person who can wait for God to answer prayer.

James 5:12-20: Making Others Whole

Broken homes, shattered relationships, damaged emotions—we live in a fragmented and hurting world. As we see all the wounded people around us, we long to help, to offer a healing touch. James gives us very practical suggestions for helping people become whole.

Why does this matter?

Dan Shaw, a linguist working for Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua New Guinea, found himself in an uncomfortable position. His 50-year old assistant, a Samo tribesman named Hogwanobiayo, had fallen deathly ill. Neither tribal rituals nor the Western medicine Dan had provided had led to any improvement. Hogwanobiayo was so near death that his fellow villagers began to refer to him in the past tense, beyond hope of recovery. But then one day he heard Dan reading a recently translated portion of John chapter five where Jesus heals a disabled man. Though Hogwanobiayo had not previously shown any interest in Christianity, the story gripped him. He asked Dan, "Do you think Jesus can heal me, too?"

Dan struggled for an answer. "Well, yes, Jesus could heal you. He might. It's possible."

Dan didn't want to give Hogwanobiayo too much hope in a miraculous healing since it seemed like God rarely did such things in the modern age. And yet Hogwanobiayo was enthralled with the power of Jesus revealed in the story. He asked Dan to pray for his healing, and reluctantly, Dan agreed. And three days later, to the amazement of the entire village, Hogwanobiayo rose from his sick bed in perfect health. Prayer in the name of Jesus has accomplished what tribal rituals and Western medicine failed to do, and no one was as surprised as Dan Shaw who wept openly as Hogwanobiayo told him, "Before you prayed, nothing. After you prayed, Jesus healed me."

A true story as told in, *100 Amazing Answers to Prayer* by William J. and Randy Petersen

1. Do you believe that God heals people miraculously in this modern age? Why or why not? If so, why don't we see it happen more often?

2. Why do so many of us not pray more often or with more conviction for God's miraculous healing of those suffering from physical and mental illness, addictions, or severely broken relationships?

3. Read James 5:12-20. What is the appropriate response in Trouble?

   Happiness?

4. What makes both these responses difficult?

5. Why does James come down so hard on believers taking oaths? To better understand this verse, think about (1) why a person in his audience would feel the need to swear by heaven or earth, (2) how this command fits in with the first eleven verses of this chapter (it may seem like a new subject, but it really does connect!), and (3) Jesus' teaching on the matter in Matthew 5:33-37.

6. In verses 14-16 James discusses physical and spiritual healing. What are the steps in this process?

7. Why would James direct the elders to pray for the sick? Why do they have this special responsibility? look up 1 Peter 5:1-3.

8. What is the relationship between sin and sickness? Does sin lead to sickness? Is sickness always the result of sin? See John 9:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 11:27-30. Based on your answer, what would you say to someone who was gravely ill and came to you for advice?

9. How does the Old Testament prophet Elijah illustrate the effectiveness of prayer (vv. 17-18)?

10. To most readers, vv19-20 seem like an abrupt ending to this book. Why did James choose to end with these verses? How do they relate to the overall purpose and theme of the book?

11. How does your prayer life compare to what James describes in this passage? Do you pray when you suffer? Do you pray when life is good? Do you regularly pray for those who are sick? What will you do this week to improve your prayer life?

12. Do you have another believer to whom you confess your sins on a regular basis (someone who "holds you accountable")? If not, what has kept you from such a relationship? Who has God put in your life that you could approach this week to become your accountability partner?

13. How can you help others become whole physically, emotionally or spiritually?

Prayer Points

Ask God for grace as you minister to others.