



## Sermon Discussions on James

Rather than having a specific study each week, we will try to use a fixed template. The aim is that we spend more time on application and sharing and less on understanding, as that happened on Sunday.

### Preparation/Tips

- Make sure you listen to the sermon, are clear on the message, spend time in prayer for yourself and your group, and can share something for every question.
- It is usually good to send the questions to your group and ask them to think and pray through the questions beforehand (so they will have to catch up on the sermon too). However, with some groups this can take away from discussion.
- Maybe think of a relevant icebreaker that connects with the theme of the sermon.
- Try to spend at least 60% of your time on application (questions 3-4, 6-7). For question 2, don't spend too much time on questions about details that have little consequence for the meaning and application of the text.

### Sermon Discussion Questions

- (*Understanding*) What was the sermon about this week? What was the Big Idea and what were the main points?
- (*Understanding*) Do you have any questions about the passage or things you didn't understand? Spend a short time trying to find an answer together.
- (*Application*) What part of the sermon was most impactful to you personally, and why?
- (*Application*) Where in the sermon/passage were you convicted of sin, or feel the need to repent?
- (*Application*) What from the sermon/passage do you want to rejoice in? How does it motivate you to respond?
- *What does this passage tell you about the world and God's love for the lost? How would it speak to those outside the church?*
- (*Application*) What is God calling you to do in the light of this message?



## James 1:1-8

James was Jesus' half-brother, the pastor of the Jerusalem church. In Acts 8 1-4 the Jerusalem church was scattered around Israel because of persecution. Life wasn't easy as religious refugees, and James as their loving pastor wrote to them to help them endure the trials they were facing.

In v2-4, **When life is hard**, James encourages us to see God's purpose in our trials. Not that the trial itself is a joy, but when we stop to think about it, we should remember God wants us to grow in maturity through the difficulties we face. That is something good, and it encourages us to persevere, to remain steadfast..

But that's often difficult as we don't know what to do. So in v5-8, we need to **Seek wisdom from the Gracious God**. We can turn to God and ask for wisdom. In the Bible and in James, wisdom is not really about information but about character and godliness. See James 3:13-18. So we seek God's help to know how to respond in a godly way, and God will graciously give it.

But we should do that without mixed motives, without doubt. Doubt here is not intellectual, as if only if we are 100% certain in our faith will God give us what we need. It is being double-minded, with one foot in the church and in the world. We ask God for help but actually we'd rather live our own way if we can. God won't bless that.

In all this, let's remember God's goodness as shown in the gospel. God gives generously to all without finding fault - without withholding from us because we don't measure up. After all he is the God who gave up his Son for sinners like us. So may we see God in our trials and seek his wisdom to help us persevere in them, trusting his gracious provision.



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## James 1:12-25

This is the last week on James' introduction. Life is hard for his readers, and mainly he is urging them to respond well to their trials: "*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial*" (v12) because those who respond well receive the crown of life at the end.

The danger is that we respond badly. His readers were not handling things well. When life was difficult they would throw their hands in the air and say it's God's fault (v13) and just give in to sin. But it's not God's fault - sin comes from our own sinful desires (v14-15). Trials don't produce sin, it just reveals what is inside of us.

But the thing is: it has consequences. In v13-18, **Two kinds of growth**, James warns that trials always bring growth, but the question is what kind. These verses are full of the language of reproduction, of babies. Giving in to our desires means sin growing inside us - conceiving, giving birth, becoming full-grown (v15). On the other hand, we have the life of God growing inside us (v18) through the gospel that has been implanted in us (v21). So when trials come we will either have sin or the life of God growing inside us, and the difference is down to how we respond. We should take sin seriously. Jesus took the punishment, but it can still affect our hearts.

So how should we respond? James tells us in v.19-25.

- First of all, **turn from sin**. Trials often first result in conflict (19-20) but in general we should turn from these evils (v21a)
- Second, **turn to the Word**. (v21b). We don't have the resources in ourselves to change, so we turn to God's powerful word that has made us alive and is at work in us. In practice that means first receiving and hearing the Word.
- Third, **do the Word** (22-25). Hearing is not enough - don't be deceived. We should respond and put it into practice, and persevere in doing so, even when it's hard. After all, if it's not challenging, we won't grow. (*About the mirror illustration: commentators aren't sure whether God's Word is like a mirror (showing us what we're like), or not like a mirror (which back then was not that good and doesn't show what we're like). The point is: God's perfect Word is worth responding to.*)

If we feel burdened, we need to remember the freedom we have as Christians. James calls Jesus' teaching the "law of liberty". Living our own way may feel more free, but it is not: we will just be dragged away by our sinful desires. But as children of God, secure in our identity, we are free to live for God, free to become more and more the person we were meant to be.



## James 2:1-13

*(We're skipping 1:26-27. It is James saying "Here are my 3 points for the sermon" - the poor (ch.2), the tongue (ch.3), the world (ch.4) - so it will be covered later.)*

The first concrete problem James sees in their churches is favouritism, especially towards the rich. James' readers loved the rich when they visited the church but ignored the poor. From a worldly perspective that makes sense - his readers were poor, so having rich friends would be of benefit to them. This was the underlying problem: relating to people based on what we ourselves get out of it, rather than out of grace.

It is worth thinking how we are tempted to do this. Who do we welcome on Sunday? Probably the people we think we enjoy hanging out with, or who would be a great blessing to the church, or a potential marriage partner. We ignore those different from us or who we think it will be hard to relate to or having nothing to offer. But this is again relating to people based on what we get out of it. It is ultimately selfish.

But James digs deeper why this is such an offence.

- We misunderstand **the glory of God (1-7)**. God has chosen the poor to inherit his kingdom. They know they have nothing to offer and so are more open to good news, while Jesus said it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. After all, it is God's glory that he doesn't need us but only gives, and supremely how Jesus loved us and gave up everything for our salvation. He became poor that we might become rich. That is his glory and we undermine it when we relate to others because of what they give us.
- We misunderstand **the law of God (8-11)**. We think we're OK because we may show favouritism but are basically good people. But that is not how life works. You break one law, you are guilty, even if you have kept every other law.
- We misunderstand **the mercy of God (12-13)**. Wonderfully God doesn't relate to us through law but through mercy. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin so that we are free. If we understand how God treated us with mercy, and not because of what we have to offer, we will treat others the same.

In all, it is a great example of the gospel-centred life. Understanding how God treats us with the gospel makes us treat others likewise.



## James 2:14-26

This famous passage is in some ways quite simple. James is speaking about counterfeit faith. People who say they believe, but it is not real. And why not? There is no evidence of a changed life, but only an intellectual understanding. It is faith without works, and it can't save (v14), is dead (v17, 26) and useless (v20). James gives 4 examples:

- Negatively, not helping the poor (v14-17). Someone clearly sees a need in the church, responds piously (“I’ll pray for you”), but does nothing practical. James focusses a lot on the poor, so this may be what he sees happening in the church.
- Again negatively, the demons (v18-19) - they have an intellectual understanding, and a better theology than most Christians, but there is no action, no repentance.
- Positively, Abraham (v20-24). His faith was not just intellectual but he took action and was willing to offer up his only son. His faith was shown to be real.
- And Rahab (v25-26). She had needy people at the door like in 15-16 but actually helped them, showing that her faith (Joshua 2:8-13) was real.

In response, we should reflect on our own faith. Does it work itself out in costly, risky decisions? Or is there no change in my life? Is our faith genuine or counterfeit? Of course, if we feel our deeds are lacking, the question is how to respond. The wrong response is just to try and do more good things. But this doesn't solve the problem on the inside. It's like stapling fruit on a dead tree. Rather, we should go back to the grace and kindness of Jesus and let his love change our heart, so good deeds flow naturally.

*(NB: This passage often stirs up debate whether James contradicts the apostle Paul. Paul says we are “justified by faith alone, apart from works” (Rom 3:27), while James says we are “justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). But this problem is easily solved if we look carefully at what James and Paul mean by their words, as it is not the same.*

- *“Works” means something else. For Paul, they are done to earn your salvation. For James, they are deeds flowing from salvation, and so evidence of a changed life.*
- *“Justified” means something else. For James, it is being “shown to be right”, as when I say something is the case, people don't believe me, but it later turns out I was right. I'm justified in that case. For Paul, when God “justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:5) I am not shown to be right. Rather, God declares that I am righteous, even though I'm not, based on the work of Christ.*

*So James and Paul do not contradict each other but speak with one voice.)*



## James 4:1-12

James continues to diagnose what's wrong with the church. Faith without works, speech and conduct showing a heart problem, and now he zones in on the conflict going on, what it shows about our spiritual condition, and tells us how to respond.

### 1. The cause of conflict: our self-centredness (v1-3)

James points to the fights and quarrels going on in the church. They flow from their passions and desires. Deep inside we are self-centred and want to have what we can't. Just think about a recent conflict - if you responded badly, there is probably something that you really wanted and didn't get. And rather than being content with that, your response shows you think this is unjust and you are more important than that....

### 2. The cause of self-centeredness: our idolatry (v4-5)

Our self-centeredness ultimately comes from idolatry, and this is spiritual adultery. We should love God the most but ultimately we love other things just as much or more. The double-mindedness (v8) is again not doubt but actually someone who has two lovers and tries to keep up the relationship with both. This is impossible - desiring the world is incompatible with loving God. And James' strong language shows how terrible it is.

### 3. The catalyst for change: God's grace (v5-6)

Yet God loves us and yearns to have us return to him (v5). So rather than threatening us or condemning us, he gives us grace (v6). We can repent and come back to him and he offers us restoration and forgiveness. This amazing grace is what should stir our love for him and drive us to change, to turn from the world back to our loving God.

### 4. The criteria for grace: humbling yourself (7-10)

If God gives grace to the humble, we should humble ourselves. James gives many instructions in v6-10 - submitting to God, resisting the devil, cleansing our hearts, mourning our sin etc - but the general posture is one of humility and need. We desperately need God's help and so we humbly submit ourselves to him, trusting that in his grace he will restore us.

The last verses (11-12) are probably a warning about spiritual pride. Following such a strong condemnation it is easy for others to feel spiritually superior and judge others. But no, we are all sinners, and instead we should help each other come back to God, as we will see in 5:13-20.



## James 4:13-5:6

As we're moving towards the end of James, he zooms in on money which was such an issue for his readers, and he points to the bigger issue of planning and who actually controls our lives.

### 1. Our Declaration (4:13-14, 16-17)

Not sure if these are Christian travelling merchants speaking or generally the church. People plan and plan to make money, like many of us do (v13). But they do so without any reference to God. It's just a statement without prayer. James points out our folly doing this (v14). We are not in control of our lives. We are not the center of the universe. So this kind of planning, without surrendering to God, is actually just sin (v16-17).

### 2. The Danger of Wealth (5:1-6)

This is an odd section, condemning the rich without hope. It doesn't seem to be addressing the Christians in church. Rather, on the surface it addresses the rich landowners exploiting the poor Christians. But it is meant to be overheard by the church, to comfort them that riches and poverty will one day be reversed and justice will be done. *(A bit like the verdict being read out in a court case. It addresses the accused but is a comfort to the victims, even though they are not directly addressed.)*

It also puts wealth in perspective. The Christians were envious of the rich, yet seeing them condemned for their hoarding, indulgence and injustice should make the church think "do I really want to end up like them?" "What will this do to my heart?". We can look at our lives to see if we see ourselves hoarding and indulging in the same way, and what that says about us.

### 3. Our Surrender (4:15)

James tells us what to say instead in v15. We should submit our plans and lives to God. "If it is God will," trusting that he is in control and knows what is best. This is hard as it requires faith in God's goodness, leaving control with him. Yet it is the biblical way, as believers throughout the Bible and even Jesus himself in Gethsemane show us. Let's pray we would repent and instead submit our lives to God.





## James 5:13-20

This is the final passage of James. His letter has been pretty hard-hitting. If as a result we feel far from God and convicted of our sin, how should we respond? The wonderful news is that God loves to restore us if we come to him, and James tells us the steps to take.

*(As explained on Sunday, this is one of the harder passages in the NT, as v.14-16 is very ambiguous. It may look like a 3-step process for physical healing, but actually it is not clear whether saving and raising is now or in the future, and whether the 'sick' or literally weak person is physically or spiritually weak/sick. I think these verses make far more sense as being about spiritual restoration than physical healing. It better fits the context, the absolute promises, James' overall thrust and the example of Elijah. But it is a hard passage so if people disagree with this interpretation, that's fine. Ask me if you want to know more.)*

V.14-15 is a more serious case where someone asks the elders for prayer, while v16 is more informal praying for one another. Both involve the community, rather than just confessing and praying on your own. They have the same steps.

### 1. Confess to one another

If we know we need help, we should start by admitting this and confessing how we're doing spiritually. The person calling the elders is doing this, and informally we are to "confess our sins to one another". If we are a community of grace, we should feel safe to do so. Confessing to others is powerful as it shows we're serious.

### 2. Pray for one another

The great privilege is to pray for those who say they are struggling, assuring them of God's love and grace, and praying that God would restore them. Such prayer is powerful, and is based on God's willingness to restore and forgive that rings throughout this passage. Again, it is great to do this as a community, as it is powerful to have someone pray for you and assure you of the gospel when you're feeling low.

Of course, sometimes we are not listening. How about the Christian wandering away and not seeing their spiritual danger? This is in v.19-20, similar but different..

### 3. Pursue one another

If you see someone wandering away, pursue them. Talk with them, plead with them, pray for them, that they might be saved. Spiritual restoration is not automatic. Of course we should do this with grace and humility rather than pride and condemnation.