

1. Introduction to the letter of James

Background

James is a much-loved letter in our New Testaments. What are your thoughts on it? [Discuss]

Consider the following points:

- **It's very practical.** It's about a faith that works. James addresses trials and testings (1:2ff), the way we talk and communicate (1:19, 3:1ff), time (4:13ff), money (5:1ff), and many other things. James has no time for a faith that does not show itself practically. What is declared forthrightly is that true faith will show itself by the way we live: “faith without works is dead” (2:26).
- **It's similar to the Sermon on the Mount.** Like Christ's teaching in Matt 5-7, it is calling us to live a radically different life to how people of the world live (cf. Matt 5:13-16 and James 4:4). We are meant to be under Christ's rule, not doing our own thing or what others are doing or what the world suggests.
- **It's hard-hitting** (1:16 “Don't be deceived”; 2:20 “You foolish man”; 4:4 “You adulterous people”; 4:13 “Now listen”) – it is straight to the point, pulling no punches.
- **It's a book of wisdom.** It's the New Testament equivalent of Proverbs in the Old Testament; it's full of godly wisdom (3:13-17). At times it can read like Proverbs – lots of wisdom that don't seem to connect. But it's about living wisely and godly in a fallen world for God's glory and Christ's honour.

The author of this letter is James (Jam 1:1). But who was James?

There are at least four James' mentioned in the New Testament. So, which one wrote the letter of James? Most scholars believe it is the brother of our Lord Jesus (Matt 13:55). If this is the case, it is interesting to note that this James wasn't a believer before Christ's death and resurrection (John 7:3-5), but he later became a great Christian leader in the Jerusalem church (cf. Gal 1:19, Acts 12:17, 15:13).

What else do we learn about James from the opening verse?

James was a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The word “servant” actually means slave. James, as all Christians are called to do (Matt 16:24), had given up his rights to rule his life, and had submitted himself completely to Christ's rule. Consider what it says in 1 Cor 6:19 – “you are not your own”.

Who did James write to? (Jam 1:1)

James wrote to “the twelve tribes scattered amongst the nations”; ie, he specifically wrote to Jewish Christians. It was probably written while the church was still young and predominantly made up of Jewish Christians (ie, the Gospel hadn't gone out in power to the Gentiles yet), and also it was possibly written after the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem had been scattered after Stephen had been martyred (cf. Acts 8:1).

Read the whole letter of James together

Reflections

What are some of this letter's distinctives, compared to other New Testament letters/books?

What are the key verses? (cf. 1:2-4, 1:12, 1:21-22, 2:1, 2:26, 3:1-2, 3:17, 4:4, 4:11, 5:7, 5:19-20)

How could this letter help you in your Christian walk?

We could sum up the letter of James by quoting 1:21-22. What important truth is declared?

We are to humbly accept God's word (Bible). Not only does it lead to salvation (2 Tim 3:15), but it helps us know how to practically live as a Christian. We are to make sure we are doers, and not just hearers.

One of our great Christian leaders had a problem with James. He called it ‘the epistle of straw’.

He did not even accept it as an inspired book of the Holy Scriptures. Who was that? And why?

It was Martin Luther, one of the great leaders of the Reformation in the 1500's who taught the five “solas” in regards to salvation: Scripture alone, Christ alone, Grace alone, faith alone, glory to God alone. He didn't accept the letter of James because he believed it taught “salvation by works”.

Was Martin Luther right? Why not?

Martin Luther was not right! James is not teaching salvation by works, but that works show that our faith is genuine. Jesus Himself taught us this in Matt 7:15-20.

Summary: As a follower of Jesus, don't be deceived. Be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only.

2. Responding to Trials (James 1:1-18)

Revision: *What is the letter of James mostly concerned about? (Jam 1:21-22)*

As a Christian, we are to take in God’s inspired word, and be a doer of it; not just a hearer.

Read James 1:1-4

Many who has come to Christ have had the notion that life in Jesus would be easier. Is that true? Christians suffer – indeed, we are to expect it. Jesus made this clear in John 15:18-20, as well as the apostle Paul in Phil 1:29 & 1 Thess 3:4. We suffer trials because we live in a fallen world where people oppose us. We also suffer trials in our struggle with our sinful nature and from the attacks of the devil.

When we go through various trials and hardships, what’s the right attitude to have? Why?(1:2-4) We are to have joy – not because of the trial itself, but because of what the trial will accomplish in us.

What things do trials accomplish in us, when we have a right attitude toward them? (1:3-4) Trials test our faith – they show us how much we rely on God. Often, our faith in God is not 100%. We depend upon ourselves and others. But God wants us to grow and mature us, so that we persevere in holding onto Him no matter what (cf. 1 Peter 1:6-7).

Read James 1:5-8

What has this to do with the previous section on trials?

So often we don’t have joy when we go through various trials, because we do not have God’s mind on things. We need His wisdom so that we can understand and see the purpose of trials.

Throughout James1:1-18, we behold God’s goodness. What goodness do we see here in 1:5-8? If we would ask for wisdom, God is pleased to give it to us generously, without finding fault.

There is no fault with God giving wisdom, but there can be with us. What’s that? (1:6-8) We can doubt when we ask God, rather than believing and trusting in His goodness and generosity. We can also be double-minded. This term is used again in Jam 4:8 to refer to those who ask with wrong motives in order to please their desires (cf. 4:4). God will give us wisdom when we ask with right motive; eg, when it comes to trials, if we ask for wisdom so that we may see the benefits of trials, and persevere.

Read James 1:9-12

There are many trials in life. In 1:9-11, we have a very specific trial and the wisdom to get through it. What is the trial and what’s the wisdom?

We can be tested when we see the ungodly rich prospering; especially if we are finding life hard. But like in Psalm 73, where Asaph became jealous of the ungodly rich and almost turned away from the faith, if we would seek God’s wisdom and have God’s perspective on things, we will get through. God’s wisdom is that the ungodly rich will lose everything and forfeit their soul (cf. Matt 16:26). So James 1:9-11 serves as an example of a trial, and how God’s wisdom can help us rejoice and get through (endure).

What is the goal for the one who, with God’s wisdom, perseveres under trial? (1:12) Such a person is blessed. They will receive God’s promised “crown of life”; ie, they will not perish like the ungodly, but enjoy eternal life with God in heaven. May this motivate us to persevere under trial.

Read James 1:13-18

We have trials from outside ourselves. We just call these “trials”. We also have trials from within. We call these “temptations”. External trials come from this world and even from God to test us (cf. Deut 8:2). But where do are “internal trials” come from? (1:13-14)

They come from the sinful desires of our fallen nature. They DO NOT come from God. The world and the devil may encourage us to sin, but evil desires come from us; what the Bible calls “our flesh” – Gal 5:16-21.

Consider 1:14-15. We have here the steps that lead to spiritual death. What are they? Desire leads to sin, and sin leads to death. Therefore, to stop sin, we must overcome desire (or lust).

Besides God never tempting us, what does James want to reassure us in 1:16-17? All that God is and all that He does is good; all the time, as He never changes. He is truly good.

What has been the ultimate way God has shown His goodness to us? The greatest good God has shown us was when He gave birth to us through the word of truth; ie, we were saved and became a child of God (born of His Spirit) through hearing the Gospel and trusting in Jesus.

Summary: Whenever we face trials, trust God and seek His wisdom so that each trial may mature us.

3. Do What God’s Word Says (James 1:19-27)

Revision: *What attitude should we have when we face various kinds of trials? Why? (1:2-3)*

We should have joy (1:2) because of what God will accomplish in us through it.

What should we ask God for to help us approach trials? Why?

We should ask God for wisdom (1:5) in order to have a godly and right perspective on trials.

Read James 1:19-20

Trials can cause all sorts of reactions in us, particularly when our trials are other people! Since God has given us new birth (1:18), how should this affect our conduct towards others? (1:19)

We should be quick to respectfully listen to others, slow to speak, and slow to anger. We should have a tight rein on our temper, for speaking in anger almost always is sinful. God is slow to anger – we ought to be too (Psa 103:8). How well do you listen to others? Are you slow to speak? Do you hold your tongue?

According to 1:20, what’s wrong with anger?

God desires us to live a righteous life; ie, a life that reflects His righteous character, and bears the fruit of His Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Anger has no part in righteousness and in the fruit of the Spirit.

Is anger always sin? Doesn’t God get angry? Is there an anger that isn’t sin? (cf. Eph 4:26)

Most of anger is self-centred. It is our reaction to hurts or injustices we feel we have suffered; and this anger is always sin. But there are times when we might feel angry when we see God or others being treated unjustly - this anger may be within the bounds of God’s righteous anger. However, we must still guard our reactions, because we can easily step “over the line” and sin. (cf. Jesus in Mark 3:4-5)

Read James 1:21-22

In response to what God has done for us, what two responses does God desire from us? (1:21)

1. We’re to keep our lives from immorality and the evil that is prevalent in our world. We’re to live to bring honour to God and to reflect His holy character. We are to be holy, as He is (1 Pet 1:13-16).
2. We are to humbly accept God’s word which He planted in us. We must listen to it, receive it, and submit to it! It is this Word which saves us, and it’s this Word that helps us live as God’s people.

What is the deception that James warns about in 1:22?

If we claim to be those who have received God’s Word and God’s Son, but don’t do what it says, then we are deceiving ourselves. Saving faith always shows itself in humble obedience to the Word. Faith without works is dead (2:17). If you think you are a Christian, but don’t act like it – you are not one!

Read James 1:23-25

What is the point of the analogy in 1:23-24?

If we read or hear God’s Word and see ourselves from God’s perspective, and learn what we are meant to do, and what we are meant to be, and if we then go away unchanged and don’t do what we have learnt, then we are like a person who looks at himself in a mirror and then forgets what he looks like.

What is the right attitude to have to God’s Word (try and find four main things)? (1:21, 25)

1) We are to humbly receive God’s Word, submitting to it (cf. 2 Chron 34:26-27). 2) We are to look intently into it, spending time reading and studying it. 3) We are to have a great admiration for it, for not only does it save us (2 Tim 3:15), but it brings true freedom. 4) We are to live it out, doing what it says.

What is the result of having a right attitude to God’s Word? (1:25)

Such a person is blessed – they have God’s blessing on them and on all that they do (cf. Psa 1:1-3).

Read James 1:26-27

One of the ways we are to put God’s Word into action is with respect to the things that come out of our mouth. What does James say about the person who does not guard his mouth? (1:26)

A person who does not guard his mouth, and therefore does not obey God’s Word on the matter of the tongue, has deceived himself if he thinks he is a believer. His religion (service to God) is worthless.

What service to God (religion) is acceptable? What is James getting at in 1:27?

What is acceptable to God is when we listen to His Word and put it into practice. Such a response will result in us controlling our tongue and temper (1:19, 26), not being self-centred but caring for the distressed (1:27), and keeping ourselves holy in a fallen world. Obedience is the key (cf. 1 Sam 15:22).

Summary: Don’t just listen to the Word and deceive yourself. Obey it– this is true faith.

4. Be Merciful; Not Judgmental (James 2:1-13)

Revision: *What does James emphasise in 1:21-22?*

Not only are we to humbly receive God’s Word for salvation, but we are to be doers of it – obey the Lord.

Read James 2:1–4

Imagine a person coming into church, shabbily dressed and smelling of body odour, or a family with unruly kids who disrupt the service. What attitude would you have toward them? [discuss]

In the context of church, when we make distinctions between people what are we doing? (2:1-4)

We are showing favouritism (or partiality – v.9), and are judging people with bad motives.

Besides the rich and the poor, what other common distinctions can we make between people at church which can lead to us treating them differently, which in turn causes us to be guilty of favouritism?

We can make distinctions between a “classy” person and a “nerd”, between a white person and a dark person, between an old and young person, between a likeable person and an unlikable person, etc.

We often put labels on people. What do you think of this in the light of Jam 2:1-4?

When we make such distinctions and then treat people differently according to what we think of them, we are actually doing the wrong thing, for we are judging them with bad motives.

Read James 2:5–7

In James 2:5-7, in the case of honouring the rich and shunning the poor, what is pointed out?

Not only is it wrong to honour the rich and shun the poor because we are showing favouritism, but it doesn’t make sense. Generally speaking, the ungodly rich are proud and arrogant, and are the ones who oppress us and give us a hard time for being a Christian. They even blaspheme Christ’s fair name.

It may seem James is condemning the rich. Is he?

James is not condemning the rich for being rich. He is challenging us in relation to passing judgment. We are not meant to judge people according to whether they are rich or poor, or on any other basis. The only thing that matters is whether a person is “rich in faith”; ie, whether they trust and believe in Christ or not.

According to other parts of the Bible, how should we treat those who believe and don’t believe?

Those who have faith in Christ are our brother and sister, and we are to love them as we would love Christ. Those who don’t have faith will perish one day. Our attitude should be to love them and to show them mercy, as well as to lovingly help point them to Christ (cf. Jude 1:20-23). Love is the key for both.

Read James 2:8-11

What are we actually doing when we judge others and show favouritism? (James 2:8-9)

We are breaking God’s command, and also delude ourselves by not being a doer of the word (1:22).

Why is the commandment in Jam 2:8 called the “royal law”? (cf. Matt 22:37-40)

This is because Christ our king has given it, and it’s one of the most important commandments we have.

What does James teach us in 2:10-11? Why is this?

Whenever we break one of God’s commands, we have broken all of God’s law. Consider a mirror. If it has a crack, the whole mirror is ruined, even though only a portion is damaged.

What are we to conclude from this point in 2:10-11?

When we break one law, we’ve “damaged” the whole law, as its a whole. The end result is also the same; whether we break one law or every law, we have broken our relationship with God. Sin is serious.

Read James 2:12-13

In the light of God’s law, how are we to live? (2:12-13)

We are to take God’s law seriously and live as those who will be judged. However, a believer will not be judged for their sins (Rom 8:1), but be judged only in the sense of receiving rewards (1 Cor 3:10-15).

What lessons can we learn from James 2:13?

We, who are the recipients of God’s mercy in Christ, are to be merciful to others, rather than judgmental. Favouritism is the result of judging and condemning others. Instead of this, let us be merciful to all.

What a great declaration: mercy triumphs over judgment! What is the supreme example of this?

When Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, He satisfied God’s judgment against us because of our sins, and enabled us to receive God’s mercy (Tit 3:4-6). Through Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Summary: Don’t judge, but be merciful to all, treating each person equally; and loving all.

5. Faith versus Works (James 2:14-26)

Revision: *What is wrong with favouring one person over another? (2:4,9)*

We are judging people; and judging with wrong motives. We are also committing sin by breaking Christ’s command “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”; ie, we are to love people – all people.

“Mercy triumphs over judgment”(2:13)? How is this true in Jesus? How should this affect us?

When Christ died, God’s judgment against us because of our sins was dealt with, and we received God’s mercy. In the light of how God has treated us, we should show mercy to others, and not judge them.

Read James 2:14-17, 24

In 2:14 an important question is posed: “If a person claims to have faith but has no deeds [good works] can such faith save him?” The answer is given in vv. 15-17 & v. 24. What is it?

Faith without works is useless; as useless as wishing well a poverty-stricken person and doing nothing to help them. Faith, without the works that accompany true faith, is not true faith; and it won’t save you.

James’ teaching here troubled Martin Luther (the great reformer of the 1500’s). He thought the letter of James was an “epistle of straw”; not on a par with the rest of the New Testament. Why was this? Luther felt that James was teaching “salvation by works alone”, contradicting Paul’s teaching in Rom 3:28.

Is James teaching “salvation by works alone”? Is he contradicting Paul? (cf. Jam 2:24, Rom 3:28) These verse may seem to contradict, but James and Paul were addressing two different issues. In Romans 3 Paul was showing that not even a Jewish person is made right with God by doing “works of the law” (ie, doing the Old Testament law), but only if they have faith in Jesus. James, on the other hand, was addressing the issue about those who say they have faith in Jesus, but there is no works to show for it. His point is that true faith is always evidenced by works (cf. Jesus words in Matt 7:21).

Consider what Paul writes in Tit 1:16 and Eph 2:8-10. Does Paul support James’ view?

Yes he does! In Titus 1:16 Paul affirms that a person may profess to be a believer, but if their deeds don’t match their faith, then they are denying the faith. Even though salvation is by God’s grace through faith in Christ (Eph 2:8-9), Eph 2:10 goes on to say that we are “God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works”. John Calvin put it like this: “we are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone”

James never says that works without faith can save (cf. 2:24). What does this imply about faith? Faith is essential to salvation. Thus, James wasn’t teaching salvation by works.

Read James 2:18-20

What is the point that James is making in 2:18?

One may boast that they have faith in Jesus, but how can that be verified. Only “good works” from following Jesus show that we genuinely have faith. Jesus spoke of bearing good fruit (Matt 7:15-20).

James gives three illustrations in order to show the connection between faith and works. The first is in Jam 2:19-20. What lesson do we learn here?

Demons acknowledge Jesus (Luke 4:33-34) and even tremble before him, but they are not saved, as is evident by their lack of “good deeds”. Similarly, if we acknowledge Jesus or give intellectual assent to Him, and have no deeds, how can such faith save us? We are no better off than demons.

Read James 2:21-26

In James 2:21-24 what example do we have about faith and works? What do we learn here?

James sets before us the example of Abraham, the father of faith. He reminds us that it was Abraham’s faith that caused him to obey God. Indeed, his faith was “made complete” by what he did; and what he did through faith enabled him to be declared righteous by God. Without works, Abraham’s faith was useless.

The third example is Rahab the harlot. Why does James highlight her as an example?

Although she was not an Israelite, she had faith in the God of Israel, as was evidenced by her good deeds. Whether Jew or Gentile, for all of us, genuine faith must be accompanied by good works.

What good works should accompany genuine saving faith?

Firstly, calling out to Jesus to save us (Rom 10:13); seeking to follow Jesus and do what He says; having fellowship with Christians and building each other up; sharing the Gospel with those about us, etc. And when we sin and are convicted of it, we repent and seek forgiveness (cf. 1 John 1:9).

The final verse, Jam 2:26, is very striking. What comparison is made between faith and works?

Just as the body without the spirit is dead, faith without works is dead; it won’t save us (cf. Matt 7:21-27).

Summary: We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. Do you have true saving faith?

6. The Danger of the Tongue (James 3:1-12)

Revision: *How does James describe faith that has no deeds (2:17, 20)?*

Faith without deeds is dead and useless. It cannot save a person, because it is not true faith.

What is the connection between faith and good works, according to James?

We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. True faith shows itself by good works.

Read James 3:1-5

In v.1, James warns us to think twice before becoming a teacher of God's Word. Why?

Teachers of God's Word will be judged more strictly. This is because they have such an influence on others. They have the potential to lead them astray (like the false teachers/prophets in the Old Testament). Note: James introduces the idea that there are different degrees of judgment. People either go to heaven or hell, but in heaven there will be differing rewards, and in hell, there will be differing degrees of judgment.

What huge challenge do teachers of God's word face? (v.2)

The tongue is one of the hardest parts of the body to keep from sin (Prov 10:19). Not only can a teacher speak words of error, but they also can use their tongue in an ungodly way and hurt other people. To control the tongue, especially when one is upset or hurt, is very challenging.

What a statement in v.2. Who is the perfect person?

The one who controls their tongue is a perfect person; for if they can control their tongue, then they can control every other part of their body (for the tongue is the hardest to control).

James goes on to speak to all Christians (not just teachers) about the tongue. Why are horses and ships mentioned, in the context of the human tongue? (vv.3-5)

A mighty horse and a big boat are steered by a small part. So too, in human life, our tongues steer the course of our whole life. We must not underestimate its effect on both ourselves and others.

Read v.5 What are our tongues compared to? Why? (cf. Pro 12:18; 18:21)

Our tongues (the words that we speak) are compared to a small flame. Just as a small spark can be the cause of a raging, uncontrolled fire, so too, our tongues – they can be the cause of animosity, bitterness and hurtful words and feelings being shared, setting the whole course of our life and others on fire.

Read James 3:6-8

What does James mean by v.6?

Even though we can use our tongues for good, we so often see our tongues being used badly, as described here in v.6. Fuelled by our sinful nature, we burn people and commit iniquity, and set our lives on fire. In this context, it's as if our tongues have been "set on fire by hell"; the abode of the ungodly.

What do animals, birds, sea creatures and the human tongue not have in common? (vv.7-8)?

Animals and birds can be tamed, but no-one is able to tame the human tongue.

Read again v.6 & v.8. How is the tongue described? Why?

Our untamed tongue is a world of restless evil, full of deadly poison, and can corrupt and destroy our whole life. With it we boast, lie, flatter, curse, hurt, gossip and deceive.

Read James 3:9-12

What hypocrisy does James highlight in vv.9-10? Why is this so evil?

To praise God in one breath and curse someone who is made in His image in the next breath is just blasphemous hypocrisy. Do we realise that we are cursing not just God's handiwork, but His very image?

What is the point of the illustrations in vv.11-12? What are they teaching us about the tongue?

Just like a tree produces the fruit it was designed to produce, and just like a freshwater fountain only gives fresh water, so we need to be consistent with our tongue; if we are the Lord's, using it in a godly manner.

If no man can tame the tongue, what hope do we? Cf. Matt 12:33-37 and discuss.

Our mouths simply speak what overflows from our hearts. Therefore, if we are having trouble with our tongues, we must look at our hearts. Have we a clean heart through repentance and trust in Christ, and through the renewing of the Holy Spirit?

Read Eph 4:25, 29-31. What do we do when we misuse our tongues? How should we use them?

We grieve the Holy Spirit, because we speak against the body of Christ. We must use our tongues to build others up, not cut them down (Prov 12:18). *Discuss how can you build people up with your tongue.*

What instruction does Col 4:6 give us regarding our conversations?

Our words should be gracious, not judgmental and condemning. We are meant to help and bless others.

Summary: The tongue can cause great damage - control your tongue by purifying your heart.

7. The Two Ways (James 3:13-4:12)

Revision: *What part of our body can cause great damage? What damage can it do? (Jam 3:5-6)?*

Our tongue can cause great damage; like trees damaged in a bushfire, so can our tongue damage people.

Many things can be tamed and controlled, except the tongue (vv.7-8). But what can we do?

With the help of the Holy Spirit we can have a changed heart so that the tongue, that speaks from the overflow of the heart (Matt 12:33-34), may speak wholesome words, rather than destructive words.

Read James 3:13-18

What are the two contrasting wisdoms presented in James 3:13-18? Where do they come from?

There is worldly wisdom that comes from this fallen world; ie, from people such as religious gurus, philosophers, and people we look up to, etc. There is also heavenly wisdom, and this comes from God by His Spirit. It is to be found in God’s Word and especially in God’s Son Jesus (1 Cor 1:30).

What’s the difference between these two kinds of wisdom, and what do they result in?

Worldly wisdom leads to jealousy, selfishness, arrogance, disorder and the like; which is what we see in our fallen world. Heavenly wisdom, on the other hand, leads to righteousness, gentleness, peace and many other good things. It’s what we see in Jesus and those who walk with Jesus.

The wisdom we live by will be seen in the way we live (v.13). What does your life reveal about the wisdom you live by? Is it God’s wisdom or human wisdom? Consider Pro 3:5-6. What do we learn here? We can either follow our ways (which is the wisdom of this world), or we can rely on God’s wisdom.

Jesus also taught us that there are only two ways to live. Instead of using the concept of worldly wisdom and godly wisdom, how did He phrase it in Matt 7:13-14?

There are only two paths in life. There is the narrow path that leads to eternal life, with only a few are on this. We enter this path when we turn to Jesus and follow Him (living under godly wisdom). The other path is wide, and it leads to destruction. Many are on this – all those who live under worldly wisdom).

Read James 4:1-10

In James 4:1-5 we have another contrast between the two ways to live. What is it?

We can live for our fleshly desires and be a friend of the world (for that’s what the world does), or we can be a friend of God and not live to gratify the desires of our flesh, but the desires of the Spirit.

When we choose to live for our desires, what does it result in, and what are we doing to God?

Living for our fleshly desires results in quarrels and conflicts; ie, it’s the very opposite to what heavenly wisdom brings (3:17-18). In regard to God, we are committing spiritual adultery – we are being unfaithful to the Lord. We are also provoking God’s Spirit within us to jealousy because of our unholy behaviour.

James 4:4, together with 1 John 2:15-17, makes something very clear. What is it?

We cannot be a friend of God, and love Him, if we are living for our fleshly desires and the things of this world. As it is for light and darkness, so it is when it comes to living for God and living for the world.

Despite the truth of Jam 4:4, no Christian is perfect. There are many times when we commit spiritual adultery and provoke God’s Spirit to jealousy. What redeeming truth do we read of in Jam 4:6? Though we sin at times by being worldly, God is so gracious; more than we can comprehend.

In the light of God’s grace, what are we to do when we sin and become worldly? (Jam 4:6-10)

We are to humble ourselves before God, submit ourselves to Him, resist the devil who is using our fleshly desires to tempt us to sin. We are to take sin seriously (4:9) and wash ourselves of it (cf. 1 John 1:9).

What great promises do we have here in James 4:6-10?

God gives grace to the humble; the devil will flee when we say “no” to him; God will draw near to us when we draw near to Him; God will exalt us when we humble ourselves. What great promises to live by.

Read James 4:11-12

In James 4:11-12, we have another contrast. What is it? What’s the lesson we learn here?

We can either judge others and put ourselves in God’s place, or we can let God judge, and we be merciful to others (cf. Jam 2:12-13). In the light of God’s grace and mercy, should we not be merciful to others?

There are only two ways to live. What does James call a person who is trying to live both ways?

He is double-minded; “unstable in all his ways” (1:8). We are to avoid this at all costs.

In the light of what we have considered in this section, how does the Lord want us to live?

He wants us to **choose** to live His way - to have His wisdom guiding us, to have our backs to the world, to have a heart of mercy; and not be double-minded. This is the way Christ lived, and we are to do the same.

Summary: There are two ways to live: choose Christ’s way - it leads to righteousness, peace & life.

8. Living in Light of the Future (James 4:13-5:11)

Revision: *What two kinds of wisdom can we live by, and what fruit do they produce (3:14-18)?* We can either live by earthly or heavenly wisdom. Earthly wisdom results in selfish ambition, boasting, envy and conflict, while heavenly wisdom results in peace, mercy, gentleness and righteousness.

What does God promise if we submit, draw near, and humble ourselves before Him (4:7-10)?

The devil will flee from us, God will draw near to us, and God will lift us up.

Read James 4:13-17

Who needs to pay attention in Jam 4:13-15?

Those who make plans and pursue worldly interests without reference to God. *Does this describe you?*

What is wrong with this type of attitude of planning without God? (vv.13-15)

It is arrogant to act like this. We don't even know what will happen tomorrow, let alone be able to confidently plan for it (cf. Prov 19:21, 27:1). It also reflects a lack of reliance on God; and it also shows that we are living according to our will, rather than God's will (cf. Jesus – Luke 22:42).

What should our attitude about our plans for the future be?

We should be dependent on the Lord and take Him and His will into account in our planning. Our lives are in His hands, and we are meant to be living for His glory (1 Cor 10:31). We also need to remember that life is short and temporary; like a “mist”. Therefore, our plans should be made in the light of eternity.

What does James describe as evil and sin in vv.16-17?

Any misplaced pride in our ability to determine our own the future is “evil” because we are not acting in faith (Rom 14:23). Also, when our plans focus on our selfish ends (eg making money), and not on doing the good we know we ought to be do, it is sin. Sins of omission are as serious as sins of commission.

Read James 5:1-6

Who does James now say needs to pay attention in 5:1 and why?

James addresses ungodly rich people, urging them to mourn because of the misery that lies ahead.

What have these ungodly rich people done, compared to godly rich people? (5:4-6)

They have accumulated their wealth, hoarded it, and used it self-indulgently. In their pursuit of money, they have also cheated their workers and oppressed (“murdered”) the poor and innocent (cf. 1 Tim 6:10).

What misery will the ungodly rich people face? (Jam 5:2-3; Matt 6:19-21; Matt 16:26)

Their riches will perish, and they will also forfeit their soul; they will perish in hell. Like in the previous section of James (4:13-17), they have failed to live in the light of eternity. Their love of money and their ungodly behaviour to have it, will bring them into judgment (cf. Luke 12:16-21).

In light of the approach of the Last Day, how should we use our wealth? (cf. Luke 16:9-11)

We ought to be generous with our wealth, using now what we have to honour God and bless others

Read James 5:7-11

Who does James now address in James 5:7-11?

James addresses believers, especially those who are poor and who are oppressed by the ungodly rich.

What does James encourage them to do? (5:7-9)

He encourages them to be patient, like a farmer, knowing that in eternity they will receive a rich reward. He also urges them not to grumble and complain (v.9); we are not to grumble and complain about unjust treatment or having little while others have much.

In the light of eternity, what event should help us be patient and content with what we have? (5:9)

The Lord is coming soon and He will judge justly; the ungodly rich won't escape.

It's tempting for us to grumble against the ungodly. What are we actually doing when we do this?

Grumbling is a form of judging. There is only one Judge, and if we sit in His seat, we are at risk of being judged ourselves (v.9). After all, for all we know, the rich person we are judging might be very generous with his/her wealth. We don't see the whole situation – only God does.

What examples are quoted in vv.10-11 of patience in the face of suffering to encourage us?

James gets us to consider the prophets of old who endured much hardship in speaking for the Lord, but now are richly blessed. Job is particularly mentioned. After persevering through great suffering, he was blessed of God (Job 42:10-12a). In the same way, we will be blessed by God with a glorious inheritance (cf. 1 Pet 1:3-5). Not only that, but even here on earth, we are showered with compassion and mercy.

Summary: Live in the light of the future; use your wealth generously, persevere in suffering patiently.

9. Sickness and Sin (James 5:12-20)

Revision: *When we are planning things, what should we do (4:13-17)?* We should not boast about what we hope to achieve, but instead, be humble, acknowledging that our plans are subject to God’s will.

How are we to behave when we don’t have much, and even limited in what we can plan? (5:7-9)
We are to be patient for our reward is coming, and we’re not to grumble and complain.

Read James 5:12

James has had much to say about the tongue. What have learnt? (1:19, 2:12, 3:8-10, 4:11, 5:9)
We are to listen more than we speak, we will give an account of each word we have spoken, we are to control our tongue, we are not to speak against each other, we are not to grumble and complain.

What else do we learn about how we should use our “tongue” in Jam 5:12? (cf. Matt 5:33-37)
We are not to make oaths, but simply speak the truth always; let your “yes” be “yes”.

Read James 5:13-16a

In 5:13-14 we have instructions in what we should do in various circumstances. What are they?
If we’re in trouble, we are to pray; for God loves to help us (eg, Psa 50:15). If we’re happy, we are to praise the Lord (eg, Psa 106:1). If we’re sick, we are to call the elders and have them pray and anoint us.

What do you make of what James says we should do when we are sick? Does that mean we shouldn’t see a doctor, or that a Christian would never be sick if he/she practiced vv.14-15? [Discuss]
These verses have often been misunderstood. It does not mean we shouldn’t see a doctor (cf. Luke was a doctor – Col 4:14). Also, Christians do get sick, even with the apostle Paul around (cf. Epaphroditus in Phil 2:25-27). These verses have also wrongly been used to justify the catholic practice of giving the “last rites” to a person dying, or holding healing meetings and having a faith healer (not elders) come and heal.

Firstly, what type of sickness do you think James may be addressing: any type of sickness?
Notice in v.15 that “sin” is mentioned, and it literally says “the prayer offered in faith will save the one who is sick”; the Greek word for “heal” is not used. Then following on in v.16, it starts with “therefore, confess your sins to each other”, and it uses the words “sin” and “heal” together. It seems that James is addressing sicknesses that are to do with sin, and thus, not only is healing required, but also forgiveness.

Although there are general sicknesses as a result of being in a fallen world, is there evidence in the Bible for sicknesses from God as a result of sin? (cf. Psa 38:1-5, 1 Cor 11:27-30)
Some sicknesses (not all) are from God due to sin and can even lead to death (cf. Jam 5:20; 1 John 5:16).

Why does James raise this matter of sicknesses due to sin?

James has challenged his readers about sin – being judgmental, being a friend of the world, being uncontrolled with the tongue, etc. There was the possibility of some being sick due to unconfessed sin.

In the light of what we learn here, when we are sick, what should we consider?

We should ask ourselves “Have I sinned against the Lord?” Many sicknesses may not have anything to do with sin, but when sick, we should at least examine if there is any unconfessed sin in our life.

When we sense that our sickness is due to sin, and it’s even a serious sickness which may lead to physical death (see James 5:20 and 1 John 5:16), what should we do?

We should humbly call the elders to come to our sick bed, and confess our sin (v.16), and have them pray and anoint us with oil. NB: God doesn’t always make us sick every time we sin (cf. Psa 103:10).

What is the promise if we should obey this instruction?

Not only will we be healed, but we will be forgiven of our sins - which is far more important.

Read James 5:16b-20

James gives the example of Elijah. How does that relate to what is mentioned in vv.14-16?
The drought was due to sin, and the rain came (healing) after the people turned back to the Lord.

What else do we learn about prayer in vv.16b-18?

The prayer of a righteous person (one who is in Christ and has no unconfessed sin in their life) is powerful and productive. Never underestimate what God can do if we would pray to Him by faith.

What is James’ final word? Why does he conclude with this?

James’ final word is a summary of what he has been doing throughout his letter. He wishes to encourage Christians not to stray from the way of Christ, and into sin, which can even lead to physical death (eg of Ananias & Sapphira in Acts 5). Let us look out for each other and help each other stay on Christ’s path.

Summary: Humbly accept the word planted in you and do it; confess your sins and pray for each other.