

THE BOOK OF JAMES

STUDY GUIDE



Wisdom for today

Life Lessons from the Book of James



TRINITY
BAPTIST
CHURCH

250 East 61st Street, New York, NY 10065
trinityny.org

THE BOOK OF JAMES STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Welcome to the Book of James. This small book is dense with practical wisdom and a no-nonsense approach to the life of faith. Above all else, James wants to see the followers of Jesus live a life that spills over into everyday experiences. How we act, James will argue, reveals a lot about what we believe. One of his central ideas is found in chapter 2:

“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

Claiming that anyone’s faith is dead is a strong statement and yet James does not back down from it. He wants each of us to be confronted by God’s standard for living out our faith and for us to repent when we fall short. This book, though short, is like a strong medicine; it may not always be pleasant, but if we allow it to do its work in our lives, we can find healing.

Author

James was the half-brother of Jesus. What a childhood that must have been! We know that Jesus’ brothers neither believed His claims to being the Messiah nor did they understand His mission. At best, they saw Him as an up-and-coming leader and pushed Him to take advantage of the situation (Cf. John 7). Most likely it was not until after the crucifixion and the resurrection that James began to see the truth and believe in his half-brother was who He claimed to be: the Son of God. James would later become a pillar in the Jerusalem church.

Date and Occasion of Writing

James spares little words for his introduction before jumping directly into his message. Because of this and the fact that it didn’t include a date, we must make a few inferences as to the date and purpose. One of the most significant moments in the book of Acts is the Jerusalem Counsel’s decision on how to think of and embrace the gentiles who were coming to faith. As a key leader in Jerusalem, it was James who stepped up and spoke up regarding the work of God. The fact that this significant event is not referenced in this book (though his speech mirrors much of the book’s themes) along with the fact that it is addressed to the 12 tribes (Cf. James 1:1), leads us conclude that it is one of, if not the earliest book written in the New Testament.

The story of the early Church in Acts is both beautiful and inspiring, but it was not without its own problems. Division from within and persecution from without became a hinderance to the fledgling congregations. In particular, many of the poorer Christians were experiencing abuse and exclusion by the broader Jewish community leading to significant financial and social pressures. James writes with “tough love” to both challenge and encourage them onward.

How to Read James

Your first time reading through the book might feel a bit scattered. This is because James writes with a different style and purpose than one of Paul or Peter’s writings. In fact, it is notoriously difficult to outline

the contents of this book if we are thinking of it like any other epistle in the New Testament. It is better to think of James as a sort of “Proverbs” of the New Testament. Similar to the book of Wisdom in your Old Testament, James has various short and memorable sections designed to teach you how to live in a practical way.

If the style of James is similar to Proverbs, the content is similar to Leviticus 19 and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. The surprising similarities between James's message and Jesus famous sermon suggest that James was present while Jesus spoke it and that he had been meditating on it ever since! Take some time to read both passages (yes, read Leviticus!) before or alongside reading James.

Aside from the style and content, how should we read James as Christians? After all, it would be a tremendous disservice to the book and to us if we read it and walked away unchanged. This book is relentless in calling us to face our own sins and failure to live up to God's calling in our lives. Take time to open your heart and receive God's word without defensiveness or dismissal. If it feels overwhelming, slow down and focus on just one section. The direct and “tough love” nature of this small but powerful book can, and should, purify us so that we look more and more like Jesus Himself. Above all else, commit to being open, honest, and responsive to God's word spoken through James.

The Book of James: Part 1

The Perspective Shift Every Christian Needs to Make

Read: James 1

James was the half-brother of Jesus and yet he didn't believe the message of Jesus until later in life. How do you think that influenced his writing? When you read the first verse of the book, what stands out to you about how James chooses to introduce himself?

Chapter 1 begins with a perspective shift. The believer is called to "count it all joy" when we run into trials of all kinds. The word "count" could also be translated to lead or to get ahead of. It carries the sense of proactive determination. What is your typical mindset when facing trials and setbacks? How is James' advice different?

Oftentimes we feel helpless or frustrated with trials and challenges because they involve things outside of our control (people, work, health issues, etc.). What advice do you think James would give you when you feel that frustration?

How can you maintain a joyful and positive attitude while still experiencing loss, anger, or frustration? Are these mutually exclusive? What would it look like to hold both realities at the same time, without one canceling the other out?

We often feel fear over the unknown or “but what if” scenarios. The perspective shift that James offers is that any hardship can actually be converted into fuel for your faith and joy for your journey. How can that defang our fear over the future?

James 1 is a preview passage for all of the themes he will address in the rest of the book. As you read over them, which do you think you are most interested in? Do any of these topics make you want to pull back and why?

James is a very action-oriented book. It calls for decisive change. Which do you think would make you more like Jesus this week, more biblical knowledge or more obedience in what you already know? Why is it hard for us to live out our faith?

James notes that we are prone to self-deception. When was a time in your spiritual journey when you were deceiving yourself? What were you telling yourself? How were you “looking in a mirror” but walking away unchanged?

What are you going to do (action oriented!) to ensure that you don't walk away from the book of James unchanged?

The Book of James: Part 2

Three Excuses that are Holding You Back

Read: James 2

Chapter 2 begins by addressing the sin of partiality, or an unfair bias in favor of one person over another. Based off James' words, what sort of situations do you think took place in the early church? Does being a Christian keep us from implicit or explicit bias?

Being biased is part of human nature. Whether it involves our kids, our social circle, our political party, or our culture, we often want our "group" to succeed above and beyond other groups. How is the Christian ethic different? Why should a believer not show partiality?

James gives a scenario about catering to a wealthy individual to hopefully receive financial support or favor. What does this reveal about what we really believe? This scenario points to James' larger premise that our actions show more about what we actually believe than our words often do.

If those to whom James was writing could speak, what reasons do you think they would give for their actions? What unspoken fear might keep them from changing? What excuses have you made and what fear keeps you back?

Loving your neighbor is called the royal law because it reflects what life should look like in the kingdom of God. How would our world be different (try to think of specific examples) if we didn't have the sin of partiality?

In his discussion of following the law, James forestalls "whataboutism" or the tendency to change the topic of our sin and shortcomings by pointing to other areas we feel good about. How does "whataboutism" keep us from growing in Christ? How does James address this?

James makes the bold statement that faith without works is dead. Remember that James was writing to real people who had real struggles with this. What sort of excuses do you think they were making that caused James to write this? What sort of excuses have you heard (or made!) in your own life?

If there was a silent film that showed clips from your life this past week, would people know that you were a follower of Christ? If God reveals that you are making excuses for sin, will you face it? What specifically will you do (not think, but do) this week to change?

The Book of James: Part 3

You Need to Weigh Your Words

Read: James 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:12

If you were writing an epistle to the global Church, what topics would you write about? Why do you think James spent a large portion of his letter writing about the tongue (our words)? Given this was likely the earliest written epistle, what do you think was going on in the early church? How different or similar is it in churches today?

In chapter 3, James uses a lot of vivid imagery. What do each of these word pictures communicate? James could have saved a lot of space (writing was much more laborious and costly at the time than it is today) by simply stating a principle or two. Why did he think we needed vivid imagery here? Which image stands out to you the most, and why?

When have you experienced harm because of someone's words? When have you experienced healing because of them? When have you been the cause of either?

James's illustrations point to a startling truth: our words are two-way streets. Not only are they a window into our soul, but they also have a shaping effect on our inner being. We are shaped by our words. Why do you think that is?

In James 4:11-12, the author continues the discussion about our words with a focus on slander. Read Psalms 15:3, Proverbs 10:18, and Leviticus 19:16. God's law is clearly against slander but there can be confusion over what that means. How is slander defined? Does the intent of the speaker matter regarding slander? What is a scenario where a statement is true, and yet it is still slander? How can we fall into this trap today? Why, as James puts it, is this despising God's law in favor of our own standards or society's standards?

In chapter 4:11-12, James encourages us to simply give a yes, or a no, without oaths, promises, or the like. Why do you think James would add this? What do these words imply about our character? Consider a scenario where you are in a courtroom and you are asked to take an oath before speaking (with a hand on the Bible, no less!). Would James be against this or not? What is the bigger idea he is trying to communicate?

The Book of James: Part 4

Becoming (un)Wise Christians

Read: James 3:13-18

James begins with a rhetorical question to cause the reader to stop and consider. In what ways would you say you are wise. In what ways would you say you are unwise? Notice that James doesn't place wisdom by itself. He adds the word "understanding" which could also be translated as expertise or skill, both of which imply training and tangible outcomes. How does that inform our understanding of what it means to be wise?

The Bible often speaks of a way of life which constitutes both high moral character and strong ethical actions (Cf. Gal 1:13; Eph 4:22; Heb 13:7; 1 Pet 3:2). If your actions are windows into your soul which reveal your character, what do your actions this past week say about your inner character?

James is drawing quick sketches to point us to deep truths. What we all know is that none of us are completely moral or like Jesus. At any given moment we are struggling with sin. Is James promoting an all or nothing approach? What standard should we hold ourselves to and how can we reasonably evaluate our own character and actions? Hint: think in terms of patterns.

Heavenly wisdom is inextricably tied to humility in James' mind. This isn't a form of self-doubt or obsequiousness, rather, the word can carry the idea of being courteous or considerate in how we engage others even when they are wrong. Do you think most people today would agree with that today? Why or why not?

When we are driven by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition we are lying to the truth. Our words may be accurate and correct, but they are not wise nor are they befitting a Christian in James' mind. Bitter jealousy is the sharp pain of resentment over another's success while selfish (key word!) ambition is the willingness to step up by stepping on another person. Think through our present cultural battles. How do these twin problems manifest today? Is there any jealousy or selfish ambition in your own heart?

There is God's wisdom and then there is a wisdom from below. Why does James call both "wisdom"?

Consider James list of what wisdom from above looks like. What jumps out to you? Notice how inner character translates to healthy and mature interpersonal skills. What area(s) do you most struggle with and what is the inner work you can do to continue to mature and grow?

The Book of James: Part 5

How to Handle Unmet Expectations

Read: James 4:1-10

So often we look to the externals of a quarrel (but he started it!) without thought to what is going on underneath. James invites us to take an unflinching look deeper. In his most pointed and harshest section of the book, he points to a hard truth: the problem starts in us. *The* reason (as opposed to *a* reason) we have quarrels is because of our selfish desires. Check in with yourself for a moment. How do you react to James' words?

What are the similarities and differences between quarrels and conflicts?

How are our passions at war within us? What does it feel like internally and what does it look like externally when these battles are going on inside of you?

Much of our combativeness in life comes from the festering of unmet desires. Does James paint all of these desires as wrong? Is he suggesting some sort of asceticism or a denying of our own desires? Can a good desire turn sour?

The "Sunday School" answer is to get your desires met by God instead of demanding it from another person. But how does James qualify that idea?

When our unmet desires turn selfish and sour, they inevitably create unhealthy conflict around us. God also has desires stated in this passage. What are they?

What is the "cure" to this problem according to James? What does both submitting and resisting look like?

Humbling ourselves is more than a momentary sorrow; it is something that is actionable. What did the activity of humbling oneself look like for King David? What are some tangible activities you can do to show humility before yourself and before God.

Grace is promised towards those who humble themselves and repent of the selfishness warring within them. How is grace different from forgiveness? Considering the whole of this passage, what might this grace look like in your life?

Complete the following sentence:

I will repent of

and will humble myself by

The Book of James: Part 6

Money isn't the Root of all Evil. This is...

Read: James 4:13-5:6

James opens this section with the phrase "Come now, you who say..." which is an invitation to lean closer and carefully consider his words. Who do you think James has in mind here? What are these people saying and how might that sound in today's context?

Think through James' first century context. What level or scale of entrepreneur would be making plans like this?

The book of Proverbs extolls us to plan and prepare. Is James saying something different? What was the wrong attitude that James wanted to address?

Where is the line between planning and presumption? Beyond the fact that you might be wrong, what is the spiritual danger this sort of thinking can cause? How can you guard against (or repent of) presumption in your own life?

In chapter 5, James gives a warning to those who are rich. Based off of what James says to them, what do you imagine was happening to cause this sort of warning?

Is money moral? Is someone better or worse before God because they have a lot of it or a little of it? What do you believe and why?

Money (or resources) throughout history creates both power and control. Proverbs 10:15 says it this way: "A rich man's wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin." What does that look like today?

A significant problem in James' day was that those with wealth could (and often did) use their money to bribe judges and pervert justice. Property would be stolen, laborers would not get their paychecks, etc. Their money gave them the means to circumvent justice and righteousness. Their money gave them both power and control, but it didn't make them sin. Why do power and control reveal so much about us?

How does our relationship to money reveal deep truths about ourselves and our relationship with God?

What practical steps can you take to align your heart with God's when it comes to your finances?

The Book of James: Part 7

Faith and Your 401k

Read: James 5:13-20

James 5:7 begins by using the word "therefore." What is James writing about and how does it connect logically with the previous paragraph?

There are a lot of things that we hope for or want to see, but according to James, what are we ultimately looking towards? Is that what you are most looking forward to?

Why is the illustration of a farmer and their crops appropriate here?

James gives two positive commands and one negative. What are they and who are they related to each other?

Establishing our hearts is a deep, soul level work, that only we can do. What does this involve and have you ever intentionally tried to do it? If being patient and established was a 10 on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your own heart? What can you do this week to increase that?

James points to the story of Job for us to consider. We often feel like if we only had more details, or the reason for our hardship, we could deal with it better. Did God ever tell Job the reason for his suffering or when it would end? What helped Job and what hurt him in his efforts to patiently wait on God's deliverance?

This short and powerful book ends with some sketches of what it looks like to respond to all sorts of scenarios (suffering, joy, sickness, etc.). Our lives are not frozen in stained glass. Our faith needs to live and be lived out in the real world. Are there any areas where you feel like your faith in God is disconnected to your everyday reality? What are you going to do about that?

James isn't expecting or demanding perfection, but we are called to respond when the pattern of our lives is out of alignment with God and His commands. How do we balance acknowledging our human fragility without making excuses?

James advocates that we navigate our faith and our failures with other mature Christians. Does that sound like a good idea to you? Why would James encourage it then? What is the indispensable role that other believers play in our lives?

If James were to sit down with you and evaluate how you are living out your faith, what would he say to you?

This book begins with the caution to not look in a mirror (come face to face with our failures and imperfection) and then walk away forgetting all about it. Why is that such a common experience? What will you commit to doing this month to not only be a hearer of the word, but to be someone who actually does something about it as well?