LEGACY CHURCH

JAMES

TRUTH THAT HURTS

A SMALL GROUP GUIDE

Thirteen sessions through the letter of James

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INTRODUCTION

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

James is one of the most helpful books in the Bible for living out your faith, and it is helpful because it hurts. James confronts far more than he comforts, and he does it with the precision of a surgeon. He is not worried about how he will be received. He cares about the souls reading his letter, and he knows that for a born again believer, truth produces good even when it is painful. It has been said that James does not beat around the bush. He beats you with it.

The letter is short: 108 verses with roughly 50 commands. James is not mainly telling us what to think. He assumes we already know. He is telling us what to do. He draws heavily on the Sermon on the Mount and on Proverbs 1–9, which is why the letter is often called the Proverbs of the New Testament.

THE ONE IDEA THAT HOLDS THE LETTER TOGETHER

James is writing to believers who are **double-minded**: they believe one thing and live another. Every section of the letter exposes that gap in a different place: in how we handle trials, how we pray, how we treat the poor, how we talk, how we plan, and how we respond when we are confronted. His goal is that we would be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4), which means whole. Wholehearted instead of halfhearted. Single-minded instead of double-minded.

Keep that idea in front of you every week. Maturity is measured by how small the gap is between what we know and how we live.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are thirteen sessions. Each one covers a passage of James in order and is built to fill about an hour with a group, or thirty minutes alone.

1. **Read** the passage out loud from your own Bible. This guide quotes the ESV.
2. **Open** with the warm-up question. It is meant to be easy.
3. **Study** the notes together. Read them aloud or summarize them.
4. **Discuss** the questions. You do not need to get to all of them. Stay where the conversation is honest.
5. **Practice** one thing before the next session. James has no patience for hearing without doing.
6. **Pray** for one another before you leave.

A suggested pace is one session a week for thirteen weeks. Groups that need a shorter study can combine Sessions 1 and 2, Sessions 8 and 9, and Sessions 11 and 12 for a ten week run.

SESSION ONE

THE MAN, THE AUDIENCE, AND THE PROBLEM

JAMES 1:1–4

> **Your faith is only theory until it is tested, and God uses the test to make you whole.**

WARM UP

If you had an impressive title or a famous relative, how tempted would you be to mention it when you introduce yourself?

STUDY

The man. The author is James, the brother of Jesus. He was not one of the twelve. During the years of Jesus's ministry, James and his other siblings did not believe (John 7:5). Imagine growing up hearing from your own parents that your older brother is God in the flesh. It was only after the resurrection that James believed, and seeing Jesus crucified and raised was enough to overturn every position he had held. He went on to lead the church in Jerusalem, and Paul called him a pillar (Galatians 2:9). The Jewish historian Josephus records that he was stoned, and Hegesippus, preserved by Eusebius, gives a fuller account: thrown from the temple, stoned while praying for his attackers, and finally killed with a fuller's club. How sure must James have been to confess that his own brother was God, and to die for it?

Notice how he introduces himself. Not "the brother of Jesus." Not "the leader of the Jerusalem church." He calls himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." His humility sets the tone for the whole letter. You are not hearing hard truths from a hard heart.

The audience. James writes "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." These are Jewish believers in Jesus who were scattered by persecution. They are living in a land that is not theirs, in a culture that is not theirs, among people who do not understand them. So why is the letter corrective instead of gentle? Because James knows what we forget: it is in trial that we find out what we are really made of. We are most likely to neglect our walk and backpedal in our faith when things get hard.

The problem. "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." James is not saying trials should make you happy. If you are happy with it, it is not a trial. To "count" is to evaluate, to reckon. It is the ability to think before we feel. The perspective is this: God will use the trial and redeem it. The chain runs from trial, to tested faith, to steadfastness, to maturity, to lacking nothing.

That last phrase reveals the problem the whole letter addresses. We are not whole. Many believers carry a deep internal conflict because their lives do not line up with their beliefs. James is calling us to wholehearted devotion instead of halfhearted religion, and he says trials are one of the tools God uses to close the gap.

WORDS TO KNOW

SERVANT (*doulos*): a bondservant, someone who belongs to another and whose identity and allegiance are bound to their master. James is not saying he knows Jesus or works for Jesus. He is saying he belongs to Jesus.

PERFECT (*teleios*): whole, complete, mature. Not sinless perfection.

DISCUSS

01 What stands out to you about James's story, from skeptic to servant to martyr?

02 Do you relate to Jesus more like a bondservant or more like an employee? What is the difference in daily life?

03 Why do you think hardship tends to weaken our walk right when we need it most?

04 Think of a trial that left you stronger in your faith. What did it produce in you?

05 Where is the gap between what you believe and how you live most visible right now?

PRACTICE

Name one trial you are in. Each day this week, before you react to it, stop and "count" it: ask God what He might be producing in you through it.

PRAY

Ask God for an honest view of yourself over the coming weeks, and for the humility to receive hard truth as a gift.

SESSION TWO

WISDOM AND THE PROBLEM OF DOUBT

JAMES 1:5–8

> **In a trial you need more than strength. You need wisdom, and God promises to give it to anyone who asks without doubting Him.**

WARM UP

When you face a hard decision, who or what do you turn to first?

STUDY

You need wisdom. James has just said that trials require steadfastness. You will need grit, because life hits hard. But endurance alone is not enough. Knowledge will not carry you through a trial either. Knowledge is information. Wisdom shows you what to do with it. Scripture is clear about where wisdom starts: the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10). That is more than awe. It is living with a sober awareness that you will give an account. Eve got into trouble not because she wanted to be wise, but because she pursued wisdom while setting aside the fear of the Lord (Genesis 3:6).

Ask God first. "Let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach." We are quick to run to lesser sources: books, conferences, counselors, friends, pastors, even AI. Those have a place, but they are not where you start. Start by praying the problem, not just processing it. Lay the whole situation before the Lord. Confess your fears. Ask Him what to do. Then comes the hard part: listen. The answer may come as a thought that unlocks the situation, a settled conviction, or a timely word from a friend. And do not leave the posture of listening when the prayer ends. Keep your eyes open. The more of Scripture you know, the easier it becomes to recognize God's wisdom, because the Bible lays out how you are to think and act, which is more than half the battle.

The problem of doubt. "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting." This verse is often twisted to mean, "If I have enough faith, I will get what I want." That is not what James is saying. The promise here is tied to wisdom. James is not guaranteeing the promotion, the house, or the end of the trial. Think of a parent: if your child sincerely asks for your wisdom, you will never turn them away. If they ask for a million dollars, you probably will, because it would not be good for them. Wisdom is always good for us, so the request is always granted.

Praying with doubt is the gap showing up again: I believe one thing and practice another. James says the doubter is like a wave, restless, unsettled, moved by whatever wind is blowing. He is "double-minded," or as one commentator put it, two-souled. Doubt sits underneath far more of our sin than we admit: our fear, our anxiety, our need for control, our greed. Often what we call a lust problem or a pride problem is a problem of unbelief.

C. S. Lewis made the same point in his essay "Christian Apologetics": Christianity, if false, matters not at all, and if true, matters infinitely. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important. If it is true, it should touch everything.

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **DOUBLE-MINDED** (*dipsychos*): literally "two-souled." A person divided between trusting God and trusting something else.

DISCUSS

01 What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Where have you had plenty of one and little of the other?

02 What does a healthy fear of the Lord look like in everyday decisions?

03 Which "inferior sources" do you tend to consult before you pray?

04 Are you praying for deliverance from something when you should be praying for wisdom in it?

05 James says doubt makes us unstable. Where do you see the high highs and low lows in your own life, and what might you be doubting about God underneath them?

PRACTICE

Take one situation where you need wisdom. Set aside fifteen quiet minutes, lay it out before God, ask, and then listen. Write down what comes to mind and test it against Scripture.

PRAY

Ask God for wisdom for the specific trials named in your group, and confess where you have doubted His goodness.

SESSION THREE

TRIALS, TEMPTATION, AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

JAMES 1:9–18

> **We do not live for this age but for the next, and the God who meets us in trial is unchangingly good.**

WARM UP

What is the best gift you have ever received, and what made it so good?

STUDY

The rich and the poor (vv. 9–11). Following Jesus had cost some of these believers their wealth. James tells both groups to boast: the lowly in their exaltation, the rich in their humiliation. It sounds backward until you settle one of the most essential truths of the Christian life: this life is temporary and the next is eternal. The lowly believer will one day be lifted up by Christ Himself, and that is the only day that matters. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). James also warns that the rich man will "fade away in the midst of his pursuits." Not vanish. Fade. You can lose yourself before you know it. It is not wrong to be wealthy, but wealth comes with a warning: do not let it own you. Better to be humbled in this life and exalted in the next than the reverse.

Rewards (v. 12). "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life." Whatever the crown turns out to be, the point is plain. Salvation is a free gift that can never be earned, but that does not mean there are no rewards in eternity (1 Corinthians 3:10–15). One day you will be rewarded for your faithfulness under trial. When you lose the money and keep your faith, when you lose the job and refuse to grow bitter, it counts. It is just not paid out in this life.

Temptation (vv. 13–15). The reflex of a double-minded believer under pressure is to blame God: "If You had not put me here, I would not be tempted." James corrects it. God tempts no one. When we are tempted we usually blame one of three: the devil, another person, or God. James says temptation comes from our own desire. He traces the pattern: desire lures, desire conceives, sin is born, and sin fully grown brings death. Pride, bitterness, lust, envy, gossip: left unchecked, each matures into death, in you and in the people around you. So know your desires, and do not let them seize you.

God is unchangingly good (vv. 16–18). "Do not be deceived." God is not the author of temptation. He is the Father of lights, and every good gift you have came from Him. And He does not change. There is "no variation or shadow due to change" in Him. God is not double-minded like us. The God who called you out of darkness is the same God who walks with you now.

There are two births in this passage. Desire gives birth to sin, which produces death. The Father of lights "brought us forth by the word of truth," which produces life. The new birth is the greatest of His good gifts (Romans 5:8).

> WORD TO KNOW
>
> **IMMUTABLE:** unchanging. God does not grow, evolve, or shift. He is steady and can be relied on.

DISCUSS

01 How would your week change if you believed the day you meet Jesus is "the only day that matters"?

02 Where do you see the slow fade James describes, in yourself or in the culture around you?

03 Does the idea of eternal rewards motivate you, confuse you, or make you uncomfortable? Why?

04 Who or what do you tend to blame when you are tempted?

05 Walk through James's pattern (desire, conception, sin, death) with a common temptation. Where is the easiest place to interrupt it?

06 How has God demonstrated His goodness to you?

PRACTICE

Each evening this week, write down three good gifts from that day and thank the Father of lights for them by name.

PRAY

Thank God that He does not change. Ask Him to expose any desire that is beginning to take hold of you.

SESSION FOUR

THE TEST OF TRUE RELIGION

JAMES 1:19–27

> **Maturity is not measured by how much you know about the Word, but by how faithfully you live in light of what you know.**

WARM UP

Are you more likely to speak too quickly or to stay quiet when you should speak?

STUDY

Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger (vv. 19–21). When things get hard, almost no one is tempted to calm down and listen. The temptation is to tell the world, get frantic, and get angry. The godly response is the opposite, and it applies in every role you hold: spouse, parent, child, employee, employer, friend, leader.

James is not saying "only listen, never speak, never get angry." *Quick to hear* means you ask questions before you render judgment and you hear both sides. *Slow to speak* means you weigh your words and let listening inform them. If you are loud and shoot from the hip, your personality does not override God's command. If you are quiet and avoid conflict, you are still required to speak. *Slow to anger* means making sure that what angers you is worth anger. Ask honestly: how much of what makes me angry makes the Lord angry? Proverbs says the same in a dozen ways (Proverbs 10:19; 14:29; 15:18; 16:32; 17:27–28; 18:2, 13).

Doers, not hearers only (vv. 22–25). Some people think they are Christians when they are really philosophers of Christ: they hear the Word and do nothing with it. The opposite error is the Pharisee, who does without truly hearing. We are called to both right belief and right practice. This is a particular danger for people who love sound doctrine. We can deceive ourselves by judging our maturity on what we know instead of on how we respond to what we know.

James's picture is a man who looks in the mirror, sees exactly what needs fixing, and walks away unchanged. The problem is not that he did not see clearly. It is that he did not respond to what he saw.

Pure religion (vv. 26–27). James gives a litmus test. You can fast, pray, read your Bible, and attend church, but if you do not bridle your tongue, you have deceived yourself. A bridle steers a horse where it should go. Bridling the tongue means saying the right thing, with the right heart, at the right

time, in the right way. Scripture names what needs a bridle: complaining (Philippians 2:14), slander (Ephesians 4:31), gossip (Proverbs 16:28), harshness (Proverbs 15:1), lying (Ephesians 4:25), careless words (Proverbs 12:18), flattery (Proverbs 29:5), and boasting (James 4:16).

Then James gives the simplest summary of the Christian life in the letter: bridle your tongue, take care of people in need, and stay unstained by the world.

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **LAW OF LIBERTY:** God's Word received by a heart made new. Obeying it is not a cage. It is freedom, and the doer "will be blessed in his doing."

DISCUSS

01 Of the three (quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger), which is hardest for you? In which relationship?

02 Think of the last thing that made you angry. Would it have angered the Lord?

03 Do you lean toward being a "philosopher" (hearing without doing) or a "Pharisee" (doing without hearing)?

04 What has God shown you in the mirror of His Word recently that you have not yet acted on?

05 Which item on the list of unbridled speech convicts you most?

06 Who are the "orphans and widows" within your reach, and what would visiting them in their affliction look like?

PRACTICE

Choose one thing you already know God has told you to do. Do it this week, and tell someone in the group when it is done.

PRAY

Ask for a bridled tongue, open eyes for people in need, and the will to act on what you already know.

SESSION FIVE

THE SIN OF PARTIALITY

JAMES 2:1–13

> **You cannot hold faith in the Lord of glory in one hand and favoritism in the other.**

WARM UP

When you walk into a room of strangers, who do you naturally move toward first, and why?

STUDY

The scene (vv. 1–4). James paints a picture. Two men walk into the gathering. One wears a gold ring and fine clothing. The other is poor and his clothes are shabby. The rich man is shown to a good seat. The poor man is told to stand, or to sit on the floor. James's verdict is sharp: you have "become judges with evil thoughts." Partiality is not a manners problem. It is a faith problem. It is double-mindedness again: confessing Jesus as "the Lord of glory" while sizing people up by a completely different glory.

Why it makes no sense (vv. 5–7). James gives two reasons. First, favoritism contradicts the way God works. God has "chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." When we dishonor the poor, we dishonor people God has honored. Second, it contradicts their own experience. The rich were the very people dragging them into court and blaspheming the name of Christ. They were courting the favor of their oppressors and overlooking their own family.

The poor man's clothing is not the only thing that can earn him a worse seat. We show partiality whenever we treat people according to what they can do for us: their money, their influence, their popularity, their usefulness.

The royal law (vv. 8–11). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If you really keep that law, James says, you are doing well. But partiality breaks it, and it is not a small break. James will not let us rank sins to excuse this one. The God who said "Do not commit adultery" also said "Do not murder." The law is not a list from which we choose favorites. It is one whole, because it comes from one Lawgiver. To show favoritism is to be "convicted by the law as transgressors."

Mercy triumphs (vv. 12–13). "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." Believers will give an account, and the measure we use will matter: "judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." This echoes Jesus: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall

receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). People who have truly received mercy become merciful. To expect mercy for ourselves while withholding it from others is one more gap between what we believe and how we live. Then comes one of the great lines of the letter: "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **PARTIALITY** (*prosōpolēmpsia*): literally "receiving the face." Judging a person by what shows on the outside.

DISCUSS

01 Why do you think James treats favoritism as a contradiction of faith itself and not as simple rudeness?

02 What are the "gold rings" in our world, the signals that make us give someone extra attention?

03 Who is most likely to be overlooked in your church, workplace, or neighborhood?

04 Do you tend to rank sins so that yours seem minor? How does verses 10–11 challenge that?

05 Where do you want mercy for yourself but find it hard to give to someone else?

06 What would "mercy triumphs over judgment" look like in one specific relationship this week?

PRACTICE

At your next gathering, deliberately spend time with someone who can do nothing for you. Learn their story.

PRAY

Thank God for choosing you when you had nothing to offer Him. Ask Him for eyes that see people the way He does.

SESSION SIX

FAITH THAT WORKS

JAMES 2:14–26

Read Romans 3:23–28 and Ephesians 2:8–10 alongside it.

Saving faith is living faith.

WARM UP

What is something you say you believe in strongly that an observer could confirm just by watching how you live?

STUDY

Start with the gospel. Before James can be understood, the gospel has to be clear. We were by nature children of wrath. Our debt was too high to ever pay. God justifies sinners "by his grace as a gift" (Romans 3:24). "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Salvation is a gift, not a reward. The moment we try to earn it, we cancel it as a gift. And that gift is received by faith. So the question of this passage is: what is faith?

Two temptations. There are two errors to refuse when reading James 2. The first is to conclude that good works, added to faith, save you. The second is to shrink works down to nothing more than outward evidence that saving faith once happened. James seems to mean more than that. We have to be comfortable holding some tension.

A faith that only talks (vv. 14–17). Watch one word: "if someone *says* he has faith." James is dealing with a claim. His illustration is someone who tells a cold, hungry brother, "Be warmed and filled," and gives him nothing. We know instinctively that those words are empty. So is a claim to faith with nothing behind it.

Show me (vv. 18–19). Someone objects: "You have faith and I have works," as if these were two different callings. James answers that faith without works cannot be shown at all. Then he turns up the heat. Believing true things about God is not enough. Even the demons believe that much, James says, and they shudder. It is the difference between believing a plane can fly and getting on it. Faith in its fullest sense is a conviction that something is true and trust in its implications. If conviction does not move you to live differently, it is not conviction. It is an opinion.

Abraham and Rahab (vv. 20–26). What about Paul, who says no one is justified by works of the law? Hebrews 11 helps. "By faith Abraham obeyed." "By faith Abraham… offered up Isaac." His faith compelled him to act, and his action was rooted in his faith. James says his "faith was completed by

his works." Paul agrees. The very next line after Ephesians 2:8–9 says we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (2:10). Works do not earn salvation. They always accompany the faith that saves. As a body without the spirit is dead, so is faith that never moves, never obeys, and never produces anything.

This confronts a version of Christianity many of us have met: "I believed the right things and prayed the prayer, so how I live afterward does not matter." James leaves no room for it.

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **FAITH** (*pistis*): more than agreement. A settled conviction that something is true, joined to trust that lives by it.

DISCUSS

01 Why is it important to be clear on Romans 3 and Ephesians 2 before reading James 2?

02 Which of the two temptations are you more prone to: trusting your works, or treating them as optional?

03 What is the difference between belief and faith? How do the demons illustrate it?

04 Some have right doctrine and a contrary life. Others have admirable works and wrong doctrine. Why does James want right belief, a right walk, and a right heart together?

05 Where has your faith recently "compelled you to action" the way Abraham's did?

06 Is there a need in front of you that you have answered with kind words only?

PRACTICE

Identify one concrete need you know about and meet it this week, quietly.

PRAY

Thank God that salvation is a gift. Ask Him for a faith that is alive.

SESSION SEVEN

WORDS THAT MATTER

JAMES 3:1–12

> **Your words do not create the condition of your heart. They reveal it.**

WARM UP

What is one sentence someone said to you years ago, good or bad, that you still remember?

STUDY

A warning to teachers (v. 1). James opens a passage on the tongue by addressing teachers, because teachers do their work with words and their words shape many people. Do not be too quick to want the microphone. Increased influence brings increased accountability. Notice that James includes himself: "we who teach." There is a vast difference between "here is my opinion" and "this is what God says," and those who teach answer to the God they speak for. This reaches beyond formal titles. If you teach on social media, in a small group, or to coworkers who will listen, it counts.

The measure of maturity (v. 2). "We all stumble in many ways." Nobody is exempt from this passage, including the person you are currently thinking really needs to hear it. James singles out speech as the measure of maturity. If you want to know how mature someone is, listen to them talk. Not when they are praying or leading a Bible study. Listen when they are angry, when someone disagrees with them, when the name of a person they dislike comes up. Your mouth will tell on you.

The bit, the rudder, and the fire (vv. 3–6). A small bit turns a powerful horse. A small rudder turns a great ship. Small things set the direction of large things, and your tongue can steer your whole life. One sentence can change a marriage, end a friendship, fracture a church, or stay with a child for decades. The opposite is also true: "I was wrong." "Please forgive me." "I love you."

Then the picture changes to fire, because James cares about what your tongue does to everyone around you. No one has to torch a whole forest. All it takes is a spark: gossip, slander, repeating what you do not know to be true, sharing what was not yours to share. Once it starts you do not control where it goes. You can apologize and repent, but you cannot unsay it. James says such speech is "set on fire by hell."

Heavenly speech and demonic speech. Heavenly speech is not always positive and calm, and demonic speech is not always negative and angry. Jesus said very hard things. Flattery can be wicked. Gossip can sound compassionate, and manipulation can sound gentle. So the test is not "Was it nice?" The test is "What does it produce?" Heavenly speech tells the truth, corrects toward righteousness, protects the image-bearer, and produces peace, repentance, and life. Demonic speech distorts, tears down, degrades the image-bearer, and produces division, bitterness, and death.

The untamable tongue (vv. 7–12). James does not say the tongue is difficult to tame. He says no human being can tame it. This is not finally a self-discipline problem. With the same mouth we bless God and curse people made in His likeness. "These things ought not to be so." No caveats. Christians have become skilled at baptizing sinful speech. We do not gossip, we "share concerns." Adding "pray for them" to the end of gossip does not make it prayer.

James finally gets underneath it all. A spring gives water according to its source. A fig tree bears figs because it is a fig tree. This is a source problem, exactly as Jesus taught: "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). "I only said that because I was angry." Exactly. Anger did not create it. Anger revealed it. So do not only ask, "Why did I say that?" Ask, "Why was that in me?" Stop trying to control the stream while ignoring the spring.

What Christian speech looks like. Speak truthfully (Ephesians 4:25). Speak to build, not to burn (Ephesians 4:29). Speak with grace, or you risk being completely correct in what you say and completely sinful in how you say it (Colossians 4:6). Be slow to speak: not everything true needs to be said, and not everything that needs to be said needs to be said right now. Refuse gossip and slander (Ephesians 4:31). This does not mean protecting sin. Abuse, danger, and serious wrongdoing must be reported to the right people. A helpful rule: if they are not affected by the problem, part of the problem, or part of the solution, why are you telling them?

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **GEHENNA:** the word translated "hell" in verse 6. Some speech carries the smell of it.

DISCUSS

01 Why does more influence bring stricter judgment? Where do you function as a teacher, formally or not?

02 What comes out of you when you are angry, tired, or hurt? What does that reveal?

03 Share an example of words that steered your life, for better or worse.

04 How does the test "What does it produce?" change how you evaluate hard words and pleasant words?

05 What are the respectable disguises gossip wears in Christian circles?

06 Before repeating something, ask: Is it true? Is it necessary? Am I telling the right person? What am I hoping happens because I told them? Which question would stop you most often?

PRACTICE

Is there someone you need to go to this week and say, without excuses, "What I said was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

PRAY

Do not only ask Jesus to change what comes out. Ask Him to show you where it is coming from.

SESSION EIGHT

SHOW ME YOUR WISDOM

JAMES 3:13–18

> **You can tell where wisdom came from by what grows wherever it goes.**

WARM UP

Who is the wisest person you know personally? What is it about their life, not their words, that tells you so?

STUDY

Wisdom is shown, not claimed (v. 13). "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." This sounds just like chapter 2. There it was, "You say you have faith? Show me." Now it is, "You say you are wise? Show me." Wisdom is not proven by how much you know or how well you argue. It is proven by a good life carried with meekness.

Two roots of false wisdom (v. 14). James names two things in the heart. *Bitter jealousy* is zeal gone sour, a competitive passion that cannot stand to see someone else succeed. It says, "If you are winning, I am losing." *Selfish ambition* translates a word once used for campaigning for office: working the room, building a coalition, getting people on your side. It is the person who needs to win, needs to be recognized, creates factions, and uses truth as a weapon.

James says do not confuse that with wisdom. You can be right and still not be wise. Someone can hold accurate information and carry it with arrogance, hostility, and a need to win. People who love truth should take special care here. Some of us have learned to use truth like a club.

Why selfish ambition deceives. It works. If it always failed, no one would be fooled. But the person who works the room often gets the promotion, and because it gets results we call it drive, leadership, or vision. This is true in the church as well. A ministry can grow large on selfish ambition. It cannot grow healthy on it. James does not measure wisdom by what it achieves. He measures it by what it produces in people. Do not be impressed by someone's influence until you have looked at their fruit.

Where it comes from and where it leads (vv. 15–16). James traces false wisdom down a staircase: it is earthly (bound to this world's standards of success), unspiritual (driven by the flesh and not the Spirit), and demonic. And wherever jealousy and selfish ambition exist, "there will be disorder and every vile practice." If what follows you everywhere is rivalry, division, and chaos, your fruit is contradicting your claim.

The wisdom from above (vv. 17–18). James gives a portrait of the real thing:

- **Pure:** unmixed with self-interest. Purity comes first because real peace cannot be built on compromise with sin.

- **Peaceable:** it seeks harmony, not a fight.
- **Gentle:** considerate, not insisting on its rights.
- **Open to reason:** teachable, willing to yield to truth. An unteachable person is not a wise one, and unteachability in a leader is a red flag.
- **Full of mercy and good fruits:** compassion that turns into deeds.
- **Impartial:** steady, with no favorites.
- **Sincere:** without a mask.

The passage closes with a harvest: "a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." Just as the tongue was tested by what it produces, so is wisdom.

> **WORDS TO KNOW**
>
> **SELFISH AMBITION** (*eritheia*): self-seeking rivalry, the pursuit of your own advancement at the expense of others.
>
> **DISORDER** (*akatastasia*): instability and confusion, the same root James used for the "unstable" double-minded man in 1:8.

DISCUSS

01 How is James's definition of wisdom different from the way our culture identifies wise or successful people?

02 Whose success is hardest for you to celebrate? What does that reveal?

03 Where have you been right but not wise?

04 Why is selfish ambition so easy to mistake for leadership? How can a church guard against rewarding it?

05 Which of the seven marks of heavenly wisdom is most evident in you? Which is least?

06 How do you respond when you are corrected? Would the people closest to you call you teachable?

PRACTICE

Look at what grows where you go: in your home, your workplace, your church. Ask one person who knows you well which of the seven marks they see least in you, and listen without defending yourself.

PRAY

Ask for the wisdom from above, and for the meekness to be shown where you have been running on jealousy or ambition.

SESSION NINE

HE GIVES MORE GRACE

JAMES 4:1–6

> **When God confronts you, you will answer with pride or with humility, and grace goes to the humble.**

WARM UP

When someone points out a fault in you, what is your first instinct: defend, deflect, go quiet, or own it?

STUDY

Ignore the chapter break. Chapter and verse numbers were added long after James wrote. They help us find our place, but they are not inspired, and a chapter break can make us think a thought is finished when it is not. James 4 begins in the middle of a thought. He has just said that jealousy and selfish ambition produce "disorder and every vile practice" (3:16). Now he shows what the disorder looks like.

The war within (vv. 1–2a). "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" The answer is not mainly the people around you. It is the war within you. "You desire and do not have, so you murder." They were not killing each other. They were hating each other, and Jesus taught that hatred is murder in the heart (Matthew 5:21–22). If you find yourself always quarreling with other believers, ask what that reveals about what is happening inside you. Are you angry at that person because they have something you do not?

Bitter jealousy looks at someone else and says, "I resent what you have." It is when another person's blessing begins to feel like your loss. Selfish ambition says, "I want to be the one who has it." The progression runs from discontentment, to jealousy and ambition, to fighting and hatred.

Asking for your own kingdom (vv. 2b–3). "You do not have, because you do not ask." Their first reaction to wanting something was to fight for it, not to go to the Lord. And when they did pray, they asked "wrongly, to spend it on your passions." They wanted their will done, not His.

The rebuke (vv. 4–5). Now James lands the blow the whole letter has been building toward. For four chapters he has stripped away our ability to pretend our biggest problem is somewhere outside of us: doubting God, blaming Him for temptation, hearing without doing, favoritism, faith without works, an unbridled tongue, false wisdom, jealousy, selfish prayer. Then: "You adulterous people!" They have been unfaithful to the One who is faithful to them. In trying to live the world's way, they have set themselves against God. And God is jealous for His people the way a husband or wife is rightly jealous for the faithfulness of a spouse. You were bought with a price. You belong to Him.

If you love Jesus and hear those words, the right reaction is brokenness.

More grace (v. 6). Look at the very next words after that crescendo: "But he gives more grace." The gospel does not change after you are born again. God showed His love in that while we were enemies, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8, 10). You can come back to the cross even if you have been in compromise. No one is too far gone.

There is a qualifier. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Pride minimizes sin, ignores it, defends it, or covers it. Humility owns it and says, "Lord, You are right." When the truth hurts, do not run from it or fight it. Let it do its work, because on the other side of conviction there is more grace.

> WORD TO KNOW
>
> **BITTER JEALOUSY** (*zēlos pikros*): *zēlos* can mean healthy zeal. *Pikros*, "bitter," is the word behind the undrinkable water in James's spring image in 3:11. Zeal turned poisonous.

DISCUSS

01 Think of a recurring conflict in your life. What desire of yours is underneath it?

02 Whose blessing has recently felt like your loss?

03 What do your prayers reveal about whose kingdom you are asking for?

04 Why do you think James uses the language of adultery? What does it tell you about how God views our relationship with Him?

05 Of the ways pride responds to confrontation (minimizing, ignoring, defending, covering), which is your habit?

06 What does "He gives more grace" mean to you right now?

PRACTICE

Ask God to confront you on one thing this week. When He does, respond with four words: "Lord, You are right."

PRAY

Confess where you have been a friend of the world. Then thank God out loud that He gives more grace.

SESSION TEN

THE PATH OF REPENTANCE

JAMES 4:7–12

> **Repentance is more than feeling bad. It is confession, restitution, and reorientation.**

WARM UP

What is the best apology you have ever received? What made it different from a bad one?

STUDY

Remember who James is addressing. These are not nominal Christians. They refused to deny Jesus and it cost them their homes. Yet these battle-tested believers had lost so much ground in their own souls that James called them adulterers. They were blinded by the ways they had been faithful and unwilling to see the ways they had not. We need eyes for both. If you think you are the most faithful person you know, you need to see where you have been unfaithful. If you only ever see your failures, you need to see where you have been faithful.

James is not a prophet thundering from a distance. He is a pastor contending for the souls of his people. Having promised grace to the humble, he now shows what humbling yourself looks like.

Submit to God (v. 7a). The first step is giving up lordship. These believers were in trouble because they were submitted to their own desires and preferences. That transfer of lordship is subtle. No one announces, "I will take the reins for a while, Jesus." It begins by confusing your desires with His and assuming He wants what you want. Repentance starts when Jesus gets the final word again.

Resist the devil (v. 7b). They had been living it backward: resisting God and yielding to the devil. The word for "resist" is not merely defensive. It means to take a stand against, to oppose. It is more than gritting your teeth in a moment of temptation. It is drawing a line and settling the conviction that you will no longer do things the devil's way. And it comes with a promise: he will flee.

Draw near, cleanse, purify (v. 8). This is temple language, the language of approaching God's presence. In the middle of their shame, James still wants them to come close. He does not want them hiding like Adam. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16). The picture comes from Psalm 24:3–4: who may stand in His holy place? "He who has clean hands and a pure heart."

Cleansing your hands deals with the fruit of your sin. It means stopping, and it means making right what you can. If you stole, you return it. If you wronged someone, you do what you can to restore what was broken. This is where we most often go astray. Many of us think we have repented when

we have only confessed. *Purifying your heart* deals with the root. Why did I do that? What is in me that produced it?

Feel the weight (v. 9). "Be wretched and mourn and weep." When a believer sees that he has been unfaithful to the One who is faithful, this is the fitting response. Do not minimize it, justify it, soften it, or give yourself the benefit of the doubt. You cannot stay there forever, but you should sit there for a moment.

Humble yourselves (vv. 10–12). If you humble yourself now, God will exalt you later, and that day is worth the pain of this one. James closes with "Do not speak evil against one another." The passage began with believers fighting, so he is circling back. But there is a practical point as well: in the moment of repentance, do not blame anyone else for your sin. There is one Lawgiver and Judge, and you are not Him. Your sin is yours.

> WORD TO KNOW
>
> **RESIST** (*anthistēmi*): to set yourself against, to stand in opposition. Active, not passive.

DISCUSS

01 Where have you been faithful? Where have you not? Which is harder for you to see?

02 How does lordship shift from Jesus to us without our noticing? Where might it have happened in you?

03 What would it look like to "draw a line" against the devil in one specific area?

04 When you feel ashamed, do you draw near to God or hide? Why?

05 Explain the difference between confession and repentance. Is there something you have confessed but never made right?

06 Why do we rush past grief over sin? What is the danger of skipping it, and of staying in it too long?

PRACTICE

If there is a wrong you have confessed to God but not made right with a person, take the first step toward restitution this week.

PRAY

Pray through the passage in order: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, purify, grieve, humble yourself. Then receive His grace.

SESSION ELEVEN

IF THE LORD WILLS

JAMES 4:13–5:6

> **Pride is not only thinking you are better than someone. It is also building a life on your own will with no reference to God's.**

WARM UP

How do you handle it when your plans fall apart: easily, eventually, or not at all?

STUDY

The letter has followed a pattern worth remembering: James calls out sin, calls for repentance, explains how to repent, and then describes how life should look afterward. That pattern is a model for us whenever we must confront a brother or sister. Most people stop at "that is sin." Love goes further and shows the way back. This passage is the fourth step: what a life of humility before God looks like.

The planners (4:13–16). James is not saying it is wrong to make plans, to travel, or to make a profit. The problem is twofold.

First, *they are in charge.* They decide when, where, what, how long, and for what purpose. God is nowhere in the scenario. These believers had built a life without the input of God, and James calls it arrogance. We do not make decisions with ourselves as the center of gravity. We incline ourselves toward the Lord and ask, "What do You want me to do?"

Second, *they are too confident.* "You do not know what tomorrow will bring." Proverbs says the same: "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). We make our plans, but the Lord is in charge, and a Christian who leaves no room for that is foolish. We have to trust His sovereignty and be ready to change course when His will conflicts with our plans.

Life is a mist (4:14). Your life is like breath on a cold day: visible for a moment, then gone. Life is short, which is why we do not live for this life but for the eternity after it. And everything is temporary: the best moments and the worst, the easy seasons and the hard ones. So cherish the good and do not let the bad ruin you. If you knew you had two years left, how would you spend them? That is probably close to how you should be living now.

Knowing and not doing (4:17). "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." In context, the right thing is now clear: acknowledge your dependence on God and submit your plans to His will. The wider principle stands as well. Sin is not only doing what is forbidden. It is also leaving undone what you know is right (compare Romans 14:23).

A word about the rich (5:1–6). This is the fiercest language in the letter, and it is different from every rebuke before it. It is not addressed to "brothers." It carries no call to repent. Its tone shifts to that of the Old Testament prophets, who often pronounced judgment on outsiders who would never hear the words. And in verse 7 James turns back to the church: "Be patient, therefore, brothers." For these reasons many Protestant interpreters, including John Calvin, Matthew Henry, and Douglas Moo, understand James to be addressing unbelieving oppressors and not his readers.

Why let the church overhear it? To comfort them, in three ways. He promises judgment on those who afflict them. He shows them there is a difference between a Christian who has lost ground in his soul and the godless world. After weeks of hard words, that matters. And he validates that the trial is real. He does not say it is not that bad. He says it is hard because the people behind it are wicked.

The passage still warns us. The sins named are hoarding, withholding wages, defrauding workers, luxury, self-indulgence, and crushing the righteous. Left unchecked, a double-minded heart drifts in that direction.

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **LORD OF HOSTS:** the Lord of heaven's armies. The cries of cheated workers reach the ears of the One with the power to act.

DISCUSS

01 Describe the last major decision you made. At what point, if any, did you ask God what He wanted?

02 What is the difference between saying "if the Lord wills" as a habit of speech and holding it as a posture of the heart?

03 How does remembering that life is a mist comfort you? How does it sober you?

04 If you had two years left, what would change? What stops you from changing it now?

05 Is there a "right thing" you know to do and have been leaving undone?

06 How does it help to know that God sees a difference between a struggling believer and the world, and that He will judge injustice?

PRACTICE

Take your calendar and your plans for the coming year. Pray over them line by line, and say of each one, "If the Lord wills."

PRAY

Surrender your plans. Pray for believers who are suffering under injustice, that the Lord of hosts would hear and act.

SESSION TWELVE

UNTIL THE COMING OF THE LORD

JAMES 5:7–11

> **The hope of the believer is not that things get better. It is that Jesus is coming back.**

WARM UP

What is the longest you have ever had to wait for something that mattered to you?

STUDY

Be patient (vv. 7–8). James has just described the oppression his readers are living under. His instruction to the church follows from it: "Be patient, therefore, brothers." That is a hard pill to swallow. In the face of oppression, the answer is not to fight fire with fire. It is not rebellion or revolution. It is patience. This is consistent across the New Testament. Whenever it addresses the suffering believer, the answer is the same: endure, do not give up on Jesus, and do not repay evil for evil (Romans 12:17–21; 1 Peter 2:19–23).

We would prefer a different message. We want James to say that breakthrough is coming and that if we keep doing right our lives will change. He does not say it, because he is honest. That may not happen.

A faulty paradigm. Much of the Western church assumes that good things happen to the faithful. Sometimes they do. They are not guaranteed. Being a faithful Christian does not always get you the house, the job, the promotion, or the breakthrough. Scripture does not promise those. It promises trial and tribulation, joy and peace in the midst of them, grace, the salvation of our souls, an Advocate, and eternal reward for the faithful. Ask persecuted believers around the world whether their faithfulness has made life easier. Sometimes faithfulness keeps you in the trial. Sometimes righteousness invites the trial. And sometimes the trial lasts a lifetime.

Until when? Not until revival sweeps the land. Not until the oppressors are removed. "Until the coming of the Lord." That is when deliverance is guaranteed in full. Like the farmer who works and then waits for rain he cannot produce, we do what is ours to do and wait on God. One day Jesus will return in a glorious, unmistakable way. It will be the ultimate rescue, the day our hope becomes our reality, and in that moment all the pain and confusion will have been worth it. So "establish your hearts."

Do not grumble (v. 9). Once again James returns to how we treat each other under pressure. Hardship makes us short with the people closest to us. He ties this, too, to Christ's return: "the Judge is standing at the door."

Consider the prophets and Job (vv. 10–11). James points to the Old Testament for encouragement. Jeremiah was beaten, put in stocks, and thrown into a cistern for preaching what God gave him (Jeremiah 20:2; 38:6). Ezekiel ministered among exiles and was told to carry on through the sudden death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:15–18). Daniel was taken captive as a young man and thrown to lions for praying (Daniel 6). Hosea lived through an unfaithful marriage as a picture of Israel's unfaithfulness (Hosea 1–3). Amos was told by the religious establishment to leave and stop preaching (Amos 7:10–13). Isaiah preached to people who would not listen, and ancient Jewish tradition holds that he was sawn in two. Job lost his wealth, his ten children, and his health, was told by his wife to curse God, and was accused by his friends. Through grief and questions, he kept clinging to God.

The idea is simple. They were faithful, and bad things happened to them. Yet they did not lose faith or lose heart, and we call them blessed. And the story ends where James says it does: "the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

> WORD TO KNOW
>
> **PATIENCE** (*makrothymia*): long-suffering, a long fuse. The capacity to keep enduring wrong without giving up or striking back.

DISCUSS

01 Why is "be patient" such an unwelcome answer to suffering? What answer would you prefer?

02 Where have you absorbed the idea that faithfulness should earn you a better life? How has that shaped your disappointments with God?

03 How often do you think about the return of Jesus? What would change if it were your daily hope?

04 What does it mean to "establish your heart"? What practices help?

05 Who do you tend to grumble against when life is hard?

06 Which of the prophets, or Job, do you most identify with right now, and why?

PRACTICE

Read Job 1–2 and Job 42 this week. Note what Job knew at the end that he did not know at the beginning.

PRAY

Pray for endurance for those in long trials, by name. Close by praying together, "Come, Lord Jesus."

SESSION THIRTEEN

BRING THEM BACK

JAMES 5:12–20

> **To live double-minded is to wander from God, and it is the work of the whole church to bring one another back.**

WARM UP

Has someone ever cared enough to come after you when you were drifting? What did they do?

STUDY

Let your yes be yes (v. 12). In the ancient world people distinguished binding oaths, sworn by God, from non-binding ones sworn by anything else. It was a way to promise something and keep a way out. James strips the confusion away. If a Christian says yes, you should be able to trust it. That requires being slow to give an answer. If you want your yes to carry weight, you will probably need to say yes less and no more. Count the cost before you commit. If you are unsure about your yes, your answer should be no. It is fine to say no, which means it is also fine to hear no. This is a matter of integrity.

In every season, turn toward God (v. 13). Suffering? Pray. Our tendency is to complain and dwell on the hardship. James says to let it drive you toward God. Cheerful? Sing praise. Rejoice, but rejoice to Him.

The prayer of faith (vv. 14–16). This is a challenging passage, and there are two serious ways to read it.

Reading one: physical healing. A sick believer calls the elders, who anoint him with oil and pray, and the Lord heals. This is the most natural reading of the English text in its immediate context, and it is how many Christians through history have understood it. It also raises questions. Why does James tie sickness to forgiveness and confession? Does "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick" promise healing every time? Scripture shows faithful believers who were not healed: Paul left Trophimus sick (2 Timothy 4:20), advised Timothy about his frequent ailments (1 Timothy 5:23), carried a thorn in the flesh that was not removed (2 Corinthians 12:7–9), and preached in Galatia during a bodily illness (Galatians 4:13–14).

Reading two: spiritual restoration. The word translated "sick" in verse 14 can also mean weak, including spiritually weak, as it does in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. The different word in verse 15 can mean weary, as in Hebrews 12:3. The word "save" refers to salvation everywhere else James uses it (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20). On this reading, James is describing a believer who has grown weak and weary in faith, calls for the elders, confesses, and is restored. It explains the language of forgiveness, it explains how James can speak with such certainty, and it fits the very next verses about bringing back a wanderer.

Both readings have merit, and a first-century reader of the Greek would not have found it as clear-cut as our English makes it seem. Whichever you hold, several things are plain. Elders are plural and identifiable. The one in need takes the initiative: "let him call." Leaders cannot always anticipate your needs. Elders

carry pastoral responsibility for the suffering. God meets the one who comes. And prayer runs across every front: the individual prays (v. 13), the elders pray (v. 14), and the congregation prays for one another (v. 16). Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and his prayers were powerful. If we are going to stay the course, it will take all three.

Bring them back (vv. 19–20). James ends with no farewell and no closing pleasantries. He ends with a warning about wandering and the responsibility to bring one another back. That is deliberate. This verse is the purpose of the whole letter. James has spent five chapters calling wanderers back, and his final instruction is that we follow in his footsteps.

Remember the mirror from chapter 1. Do not look into this letter, see what is true, and walk away unchanged.

> **WORD TO KNOW**
>
> **SAVE** (*sōzō*): to rescue or make whole. It can mean physical healing, but James elsewhere uses it for the salvation of the soul.

DISCUSS

01 Is your yes reliable? Where do you say yes under social pressure when you should say no?

02 When you suffer, is your first move to pray or to process and complain?

03 Which reading of verses 14–16 do you find more persuasive, and why? What do both readings require of us?

04 Why is it hard to "call for the elders" or to confess sin to another believer? What would make it easier in your church?

05 Is there someone you know who is wandering? What would it look like to go after them with humility?

06 Looking back over the whole letter, where has God shown you the gap between what you believe and how you live? What have you done about it?

PRACTICE

Two things. Write down the one area where this study convicted you most and the step you will take. Then reach out this week to one person who has drifted.

PRAY

Pray for one another by name, confess what needs confessing, and ask God to make you a people who do not let each other wander.

APPENDIX

FOR LEADERS

Your job is not to teach the passage a second time. It is to help people be honest in front of it. A few suggestions:

- **Read the passage aloud first, every time.** Let James speak before anyone else does.
- **Go first.** A group will only be as honest as its leader. Answer the hardest question yourself before you ask anyone else to.
- **Do not rescue people from conviction.** James is meant to sting. Resist the urge to soften it, and trust that grace is on the other side.
- **Keep the gospel in view.** James writes to people who are already born again. His commands are not a ladder to earn God's favor. They describe the life that grows from the new birth (1:18) and the implanted word (1:21). If the group drifts toward "try harder," bring them back to "He gives more grace" (4:6).
- **Follow up on the practice.** Begin each session by asking how last week's practice went. Hearing without doing is the very thing this letter warns against.
- **Protect the room.** A study on the tongue, favoritism, and repentance will surface real things. What is shared in the group stays in the group.

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Soli Deo Gloria

LEGACY CHURCH · SMALL GROUP GUIDE