

CLOSER LOOK



A LIFEGROUP STUDY ON THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

In the WORD: Walking through the Book of James
Week 2
Days 8-14 (James 2:20-4:10)
Summer 2022

INSTRUCTIONS TO SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Prior to this second lesson, please have your lifegroup complete days 8 through 14 of *In the WORD: Walking through the Book of James*. This reading will take your group through James 2:20-4:10.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Reading the Bible can sometimes be intimidating for people. What is it about reading the Scripture that can seem daunting?

What are some tips and tricks for making Bible reading easier for Christians?

Our masterful and creative God has created us all with different personalities, hobbies, likes, and dislikes. Try to find some ways of getting into God's Word that fits with your own, unique personality. Ask someone with a similar personality to you how he or she finds a way to get into the Scripture on a daily basis.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says about a particular topic.

Have a volunteer read James 2:20-3:8 (or the Scripture from Days 8-10 of In the WORD)

Take a moment to review your answers from days 8-10 of the study. What ideas or verses stood out to you?

Was there anything that James said in these verses that was unfamiliar to you? Was there anything that was challenging to you?

In these verses, James discusses the destructive power of the tongue and says it is full of poison. On the flipside, our words have the ability to do much good. Have you ever had someone speak to you in a way that changed your life for the better? Explain what happened.

Have a volunteer read James 3:9-3:18 (or the Scripture from Days 11-12 of In the WORD)

Take a moment to review your answers from days 11-12 of the study. What ideas or verses stood out to you?

Was there anything that James said in these verses that was unfamiliar to you? Was there anything that was challenging to you?

In verses 14-15, James warns against selfish ambition and jealousy. What's the difference between ambition and selfish ambition? Why do you think James links jealousy and selfish ambition? What do they both have in common?

Have a volunteer read James 4:1-10 (or the Scripture from Days 13-14 of In the WORD)

Take a moment to review your answers from days 13-14 of the study. What ideas or verses stood out to you?

Was there anything that James said in these verses that was unfamiliar to you? Was there anything he wrote that is challenging to you?

These verses really contrast the ways of the Lord (a life of humility and meekness) with the ways of the world (a life of pride and covetousness). Who is someone you know who really lives a life for the Lord? How is his or her life different from the ways of the world?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scriptures apply directly to their lives.

So far, what verse from the book of James has spoken the most to you? In what way?

How is spending daily time in God's Word affecting your life?

PRAYER REQUESTS

Take a moment to ask your group if there are any prayer requests.

PRAY WITH YOUR GROUP

Pray over your group's prayer requests, along with the following prayer:

Father God, thank You for the gift of salvation. I pray that You will help us with our speech. Enable us to have restraint with our words and speak kindly to others. Help us to listen more and speak less. God, we also pray that You would help us live lives of humility and meekness. Grant us Your godly wisdom and teach us Your ways. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!

LP REMINDERS

- Stay up to date with emails and/or social media for any changes on Lifepoint's meeting times.

MEMORIZE

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:10)

COMMENTARY

James 2:20-4:10

2:20-25 James's hypothetical opponent wanted evidence of James's teaching (v. 20). James addressed his antagonist as foolish—empty or senseless. One who lacks understanding thinks and acts foolishly. James has already instructed his readers who lack wisdom to ask God for it (Jas. 1:5). A faith not accompanied by actions is useless, like land that grows no crops or money that generates no interest. James argued that genuine faith is more than believing the truth and that faith can be demonstrated only by actions.

The phrase "justified" also could be translated "declared righteous" or "set right" (v. 21) James pointed to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as evidence of His faith. James quoted Genesis 15:6 (v. 23). Abraham's faith was established long before Abraham demonstrated that faith by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22). It wasn't Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac that saved him. Rather, Abraham's placing Isaac on the altar showed the faith he already possessed. The second example James used was that of Rahab who showed the genuineness of her faith by welcoming the Israelite spies who surveyed Jericho and by helping them escape after they had completed their mission (Josh. 2). God accepted her as He also did Abraham because of her faith. Her faith-based actions are remembered thousands of years later. The writer of Hebrews honored Rahab by calling attention to how she exercised her faith through her actions (Heb. 11:31).

2:26 In verse 26, James presented the imagery of a corpse. The term translated "spirit" refers to the breath of life in this context not to the Holy Spirit. If the body is alive, signs of life will be evident. Such signs include breathing, movement, and heartbeat. In the same manner, if faith exists within a person, signs of faith will be evident—signs such as acts of kindness, words of witness, spiritual growth, and worship. James concluded that, just as the body is dead without the breath of life, so faith is dead without deeds or actions. James's words should give little comfort to those who profess faith in words but live untransformed lives. Confession of faith is meaningless unless it expresses itself in action.

3:1. James was deeply concerned about sins of speech. He referred to them previously in the book and will do so again. Evidently, there were many believers who wanted to teach, but not all were qualified or equipped. Some selfishly may have wanted the prestige, recognition, and honor the teacher's role afforded. James warned against allowing believers to become teachers simply because they wanted such a position. He knew they first needed a firm grasp of the gospel's contents and applications for living.

3:2-3. His words apply specifically to teachers, but also generally to all Christians. He declared all believers stumble. Note he included himself. The Greek word translated "stumble" means "to make a false step," thus "to commit error." It can have the stronger ideas of offending or transgressing. Here it has the sense of sinning or failing in speech. "In many ways" means "often" or "many times." James declared that a person who can continuously avoid sinning in speech is a mature man. Being careful in what we say and in how we express ourselves shows we are maturing as believers. In verse 3 James moved to the first of three illustrations that stress the power of

speech. The bits enable riders to guide the whole animal. James's point is that small bits could control large, powerful animals. Bits have power out of proportion to their size.

3:4-6. James next used ships that were very large to present the disparity between size and power. When huge ships encounter a storm and are driven by fierce ("stiff," "harsh") winds, the ships' pilots use very small rudders to guide the vessels in the desired direction. The tongue is a small part of the body but has tremendous power and influence of speech—for good or bad. James pointed out a small fire could start a raging inferno that engulfs a huge forest. In the same way, uncontrolled speech can be almost unlimitedly destructive. The Greek word translated "corrupts" means "stains" or "soils" and has the further sense of contaminating. The tense conveys continuous action: Uncontrolled speech goes on contaminating the whole body—the total personality. Also, such speech sets the course of life on fire. The phrase "the course of life" (literally, "the wheel of life") likely refers to a person's span of life from birth to death. Uncontrolled speech cuts a path of destruction throughout a person's entire lifetime.

3:7-8. Though humans have tamed or domesticated all kinds of creatures, we still have trouble taming the tongue. James described the tongue as a restless evil. "Restless" conveys the sense of instability. It has the idea of impulsiveness, unpredictability, and inconsistency. Though not evil in itself, the tongue (or our speech) is capable of great evil (see v. 6). In fact, it can be death-dealing. "Deadly" literally is "death-bringing." Poisonous speech strikes with venom comparable to that of the world's deadliest viper.

3:9-12. James presented a devastating contradiction to emphasize believers' deadly misuse of speech. Christians continuously verbalize praise to God, who is Lord and Heavenly Father. The Greek term for "praise" gives us our word eulogy—"a good word." James's scathing indictment is that believers turn from the highest use of speech—praising God—to the lowest—cursing people. In verse 11, James drove home the necessity of believers' maintaining consistency of speech. His first illustration from nature concerned water, a precious commodity. A spring gushing out of a fissure in the earth does not produce both sweet and bitter water, does it? His second illustration concerns food-producing plants. These plants produce after their kind, do they not? Fig trees produce figs, never olives. Grapevines produce grapes, never figs. As a third illustration, James returned to the subject of water. A spring produces one kind of water. A saltwater spring, such as those in the Dead Sea area, could not yield fresh water—always at a premium in the promised land. James focused on nature's consistency to emphasize that believers' speech needs to be consistent with their new nature in Christ and not inconsistent with it. 3:13. James 3:2–12 presents shortcomings of the tongue to which teachers and all individuals are vulnerable.

3:13–18 reminds us of our need to demonstrate genuine wisdom. The words particularly apply to aspiring teachers, but they have relevance to all believers. The opening rhetorical question asks how we can show that we have wisdom. Wise refers to someone with moral insight and skill in deciding practical issues of conduct. Understanding pictures someone with the knowledge of an expert. We are to show the presence of wisdom by good deeds practiced with humility. Only obedient deeds, not mere talk, prove the presence of wisdom. Humility refers to a submissive spirit opposed to arrogance and self-seeking. The person with humility is not a doormat for the desires of others, but controls and overpowers the natural human tendency to be arrogant and self-assertive. Non-Christian Greeks felt that this type of humility was a vice. Christianity made meekness into a virtue. "Meek" in Matthew 5:5 is the adjectival form of the noun translated here as humility. Jesus promised the "meek" they would inherit the earth. Jesus meant a believer who relates to God with dependence and contentment will reap God's abundant blessings.

3:14. Bitter envy and selfish ambition prove that a person is following the route of false wisdom. Envy describes a determined desire to promote one's opinion to the exclusion of the opinions of others. Selfish ambition pictures a person who tries to promote a cause in an unethical manner. This person becomes willing to use divisive means to promote a personal viewpoint. Bitter rivalries develop out of these practices. James warned that people who had envy and selfish ambition could boast about it or deny the truth. Boasting describes the malicious triumphant attitude gained by one party over its opponents. Those who choose to deny the truth can end up rejecting the truth of the gospel. Envy of Jesus led the religious leaders to deny his person and power and to plot his death (John 11:47–53).

3:15. This verse uses three adjectives to describe the distinctive traits and source of false wisdom. First, negatively, false wisdom does not come from heaven or from God. Its source is earthly. It belongs to the way of life of this world. Second, false wisdom is unspiritual, belonging to the natural world and not to the supernatural world. It comes from the mental and emotional ideas of fallen human beings.

Unfortunately, we Christians are too often guilty of using this twisted wisdom. Finally, this false wisdom is of the devil. Satan uses it to corrupt relationships.

3:16. The results of envy and selfish ambition are disorder and every evil practice. Disorder describes an experience of anarchy and disturbance. Such disarray affects private relationships between Christians and public meetings of believers. Every evil practice pictures an evil from which no good can come. People who cater to selfish ambition need never expect to develop any fruit which is godly, righteous, or helpful to others. False wisdom promotes self-assertion and independence. It destroys a spirit of mutual concern. Where Christians “do their own thing” instead of caring for one another, a community of support and mercy can disintegrate (see 1 Cor. 1:10–17). Paul outlined a solution for this epidemic of selfish living, telling us to look out for “the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

3:17. True wisdom is free from self-interest and strife. This verse lists eight traits or characteristics of true wisdom. The first is purity. People with true wisdom are pure in that they have put aside the vices of a self-seeking nature and factionalism. This trait provides the secure foundation for all that follows. The following five traits show the attitude of true wisdom toward other people. Peace-loving means it demonstrates a desire to promote peace between struggling factions. Considerate refers to being reasonable in the demands it makes on others. Submissive indicates a willingness to learn from others by being open to reason. Full of mercy is revealed by offering compassion to those in distress. Full of good fruit is shown by kind actions and helpful deeds to others. The final two traits describe the essential nature of true wisdom in itself. It is impartial, without prejudice and unwavering in its commitments. True wisdom is sincere, genuine and open in its approaches to others. Jesus particularly showed his genuineness in his dialogues with Pilate (John 18:33–37).

3:18. Verse 18 concludes this section with a description of the effects of true wisdom. True wisdom results in a harvest of righteousness, that is, a conformity to God’s will. True wisdom also lets one experience peace, the enjoyment of harmonious relationships between human beings.

4:1. Evidently, the peace and peacemakers James wrote about in 3:17-18 were in short supply among these Christians. He pointedly asked: From what source did their wars and the fights arise? The word wars refers to chronic military campaigns, while fights indicates separate battles in those campaigns. In the context of conflict among believers, the words refer to “disputes” and “quarrels;” some were expressions of ongoing hostility while others were temporary flare-ups. We get our word hedonism from the Greek term for “cravings.” It conveys intense desire for what a person does not have. The term “war” has the sense of ongoing military action in which sensuality arrays its forces and moves to the attack in believers’ bodies.

4:2a. These believers kept on desiring and went on failing to get what they desired. The Greek term rendered “desire” means “lust after” or “covet.” It is different from the word for “cravings” in verse 1, but it also has the idea of focused yearning for what a person does not have. James used strong language in an attempt to drive home the seriousness of these Christians’ behavior. When he charged, “you murder,” he probably had in mind Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:21-22, where the Lord taught that hatred and contempt are spiritually tantamount to murder. James was not describing petty differences but substantial and chronic conflict among believers. The sense is probably that these Christians wanted what others had, could not get what they wanted, and continued their hostile attempts to obtain their desires. The Tenth Commandment prohibits coveting (see Ex. 20:17), but Christians were shattering it. The word “covet” conveys the sense of jealousy, spite, and envy—a white-hot zeal to have what someone else has. These believers’ attempts to get what they wanted were being frustrated, so they continued to fight and war (see v. 1).

4:2b-3. These believers did not receive because they did not ask in prayer. James did not suggest that God would give them what they coveted and quarreled over. He well may have meant his readers did not receive fulfillment and satisfaction because they had wrong motives and methods. Their greedy infighting left them empty and frustrated. When these Christians petitioned God, they still did not get what they wanted because their desires were wrong, were not in line with God’s will. The word “wrongly” can point to evil motives. Believers selfishly asked God to fulfill their desires for pleasure. “Spend” has the idea of squandering resources, of wasting them or consuming them by extravagance. The phrase “desires for pleasure” translates the Greek word for self-gratification that James used in verse 1 (“cravings”). God’s answer to selfish, self-serving prayers is a resounding “No!”

4:4. Here “adulteresses” has a spiritual reference, describing one who is unfaithful to God. It probably reflects the Old Testament background of Israel’s committing adultery by idolatry. The term “world” indicates the sphere that is separated from God and dominated by evil. “Friendship with the world”—adopting its values and methods—means setting oneself in opposition to God. The word for “hostility” has the idea of separation. Whoever is disposed or willing to be the world’s friend becomes God’s enemy. Whoever chooses to live in the sphere ruled by evil thereby makes himself or herself God’s enemy.

4:5. Precisely what Scripture James had in mind here is difficult to determine. One suggestion is that he had in mind a verse such as Genesis 6:3, Exodus 20:5, or Exodus 34:14; but he restated it in his words. The phrase “without reason” means “to no purpose.” We might paraphrase the question: “Do you suppose the Scripture does not mean what it states?” God’s Spirit begins to reside in believers at conversion, and His Spirit continues to yearn jealously for their loyalty. With love He intensely pursues their loyalty. The Spirit works in accordance with God the Father’s insistence on having no rivals in their hearts. Thus the Spirit seeks to guide us toward being God’s friends and away from being friends of the world.

4:6. We do not have to continue in a state of bitter, selfish conflict. In contrast to destructive infighting, greater grace is available to overcome hostility and restore relationships. The term “grace” has the sense of God’s free gift and here refers to the necessary power to end chronic conflict with others, renew loyalty to Christ, and relate in love. James quoted Proverbs 3:34 to remind us of the peril of pride and the need for humility: God goes on setting Himself in opposition to the haughty and arrogant, but He continually extends His favor to people who are conscious of their need for His resources.

4:7. Ten urgent imperatives appear in verses 7-10. This extensive call for immediate, remedial action shows the seriousness of the situation being addressed. The first command is “submit to God.” By deliberate choice, these Christians were to align themselves under God’s leadership and be obedient to His directives. In their renewed obedience to God, they were to set themselves in opposition to the Devil. Because of God’s presence and power with them, the Devil would flee from them. Evil would be vanquished from the battlefield.

4:8. In rapid-fire succession James gave three additional imperatives. He urged believers to “draw near to God” for the purpose of offering Him reverence and worship. To do so would strengthen or repair their personal relationship with Him.

4:9. James piled up terms to stress the sincere repentance believers should demonstrate because of their sins. They should be so distressed that they are moved to lament with tears. Their frivolous “laughter” should become lamenting; and their shallow, worldly “joy” should be changed to dejection. Only deep, genuine repentance would lead to the forgiveness they needed to remedy their situation.

4:10. James repeated the emphasis he had made in verses 6-7. He called on these readers to confess to God their sins, weaknesses, and inadequacies. They were to admit their need for His grace and be open to receive it. As a result of this change in attitude, God would lift conflict and divided loyalty from them. He would enhance their relationship with Him, and they would have moral and spiritual power necessary for Christian living. God’s exaltation would be the polar opposite of the worldly prestige, honor, and recognition for which they fought one another.