

1. Introduction to the letter of James

Background

Who is the author? (James 1:1)

The author of this letter is James. But which James is he, as there are at least 4 mentioned in the New Testament? Most scholars believe it is the brother of our Lord Jesus (Matt 13:55). If this be the case, it is interesting to note that this James wasn't a believer before Christ's death and resurrection (John 7:3-5), but he later became a great Christian leader in the Jerusalem church (cf. Gal 1:19, 2:9, Acts 12:17, 15:13).

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

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

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

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

Read the whole letter of James together

Reflections

What are your thoughts about this letter? What was the purpose for it being written? What are some of its distinctives, compared to other New Testament letters/books? [encourage discussion]

After the discussion, consider the following thoughts about the letter of James:

- **It is very practical.** It's about a faith that works. He addresses trials and testings (James 1:2ff), the way we talk and communicate (1:19, 3:1ff), money (5:1ff), time (4:13ff), and many other things. He has no time for a faith that does not show itself practically. Indeed, Martin Luther had a problem with this letter, as he thought it taught "salvation by works". But it's not teaching that at all. Instead, it is saying that true faith will show itself by the way we live - "faith without works is dead" (Jam 2:26).
- **It is like the Sermon on the Mount** (Christ's teaching in Matt 5-7), calling us to live a radically different life to how people of the world live (cf. Matt 5:13-16 and James 4:4). We are meant to be under Christ's rule, not doing our own thing or what others are doing or what the world suggests. Instead, we are to be following Christ, and doing what His apostles taught us.
- **It is hard-hitting** (1:16 "Don't be deceived"; 2:20 "You foolish man"; 4:4 "You adulterous people"; 4:13 "Now listen") – it is straight to the point, pulling no punches.
- **It is a book of wisdom.** It's the New Testament equivalent to the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament; it's full of Christian wisdom. At times it can read like Proverbs – bits and pieces of wisdom that don't seem to connect too well. But it's about living wisely and godly in a fallen world for God's glory and the praise of Jesus.

We could sum up the letter of James by quoting 1:21-22. What does this say? What's the key?

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

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

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

Read James 1:1-18

Many who have come to faith in Christ have had the notion that life would be easier with Jesus. Because of Christ's love and care they think they will be free from suffering trials and tests. Is that true? Christians suffer – indeed, we are to expect it. Consider what Jesus said in John 15:18-20 and what Paul said in Phil 1:29 & 1 Thess 3:4. We suffer trials because we live in a fallen world where people oppose Christians. We also suffer trials in our struggle with our sinful nature and from the attacks of the devil.

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

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

Read James 1:5-8. Why is this mentioned? What has this to do with trials?

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

Throughout James 1:1-18, we behold God's goodness. What goodness do we see here in 1:5-8? If we would ask for wisdom, God is pleased to give it to us generously, without finding fault. God, in His goodness, is the great giver, and He wants to give us wisdom if we would humble ourselves and ask Him.

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

As we shall find in the letter of James, the next section, 1:9-11, may not seem to fit in with the idea of persevering under trial. But look a little deeper. Is not a trial being mentioned, together with wisdom? We are tested when we see the ungodly rich gaining and prospering; especially if we follow Christ and we are finding life hard. In Psalm 73, Asaph became jealous of the ungodly rich and almost turned away from the faith. But the key is wisdom – having God's perspective on things. For Asaph, God enabled him to see how the ungodly rich are heading for destruction. James highlights how the rich will lose everything. So James 1:9-11 serves as an example of a trial, and how God's wisdom can help us rejoice.

What is the goal for the one who, with God's wisdom, perseveres under trial?

Such a person is blessed. They will receive God's promised "crown of life"; ie, they will not perish or fade away, but enjoy eternal life with God in heaven. May this motivate us to persevere under trial.

In 1:13-14 we have the English word "tempted". In actual fact, it is the verb form of the word "trial" ("test") in 1:2 & 1:12. Should 1:13 be understood, then, as saying that God doesn't send us trials? It is clear that God does test us and send us trails (cf. Deut 8:2 & 13:3, or Job 1). However, the Greek word for trial can have two meanings, depending on the context. It can refer to "external" trials that come upon us; ie, difficult circumstances. God is responsible for these. It can also refer to "internal" trials, or temptations; ie, the negative reaction we have to a difficulty; eg, anger, jealousy, etc. 1:14 makes clear the latter interpretation, and we therefore translate it as "tempted". God is not responsible for this.

Who, or what, is responsible for our "internal" trials and difficulties? (1:13-15)

It's the (sinful) desires from our fallen nature. For example, we may be experiencing poverty, but an ungodly neighbour has plenty. When we are tempted to become jealous of him and be angry about our circumstances, this is not from God, nor even from the devil, but from our fallen sinful nature.

Consider again 1:13-15. We have here the steps that lead to spiritual death. What are they? Desire leads to sin, and sin leads to death. Therefore, to stop sin, we must overcome desire (or lust).

Besides God never tempting us, what does James want to reassure us in 1:16-18?

All that God is and all that He does is good; all the time, as He never changes. For us, the greatest goodness He has shown us was when He "gave birth to us through the word of truth"; ie, we became a child of God (born of His Spirit) through God giving us His Gospel, by which we trusted in Christ.

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

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

Revision: *What attitude should we have when we face various kinds of trials, and why?*

We should have joy (1:2), not because trials are fun, but because of what God will accomplish in us. He tests our faith to grow and mature us. *How did you go this last week?*

What should we ask God for to help us approach trials the right way? What does God promise?

We should ask God for wisdom (1:5) to have the right perspective on trials. God promises to generously give us wisdom if we simply ask him and believe His promise, rather than doubt it.

Read James 1:12-27

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

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

According to 1:20, what type of life does God desire?

God desires us to live a righteous life; ie, it reflects His character and standard, and bears the fruit of His Spirit (read Gal 5:22-23). What place does anger have among these fruit? (It has no place at all, does it?)

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

Most of our anger is self-centred. It is in reaction to hurts or injustices we feel we have suffered, and this anger is always sin. But there are times when we might feel angry when we see God or others being treated unjustly - this anger may be within the bounds of God's righteous anger. However, we must still guard our reactions, because we can easily step "over the line" and sin.

In response to what God has done for us, what two responses does God seek from us? (1:21-22)

1. Firstly, we are to keep our lives from moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent in the world around us. We are to live lives that bring honour to God and reflect His good and perfect character. In effect, we are to be holy, just as He is holy (1 Peter 1:13-16).
2. Secondly, we are to humbly accept God's word which He planted in us. We must listen to it, submit to it, and then most importantly – do it! It is this Word which saves us, as it speaks of Christ and His way.

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

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

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

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

What is the right attitude to have to God's Word? (1:21, 25)

1) We are to humbly receive it, submitting to it (cf. 2 Chron 34:26-28). 2) We are to look intently into it, spending time reading and studying it. 3) We are to have a great admiration for it, for not only does it save us (2 Tim 3:15), but it brings true freedom. 4) We are to abide or live it out, doing what it says.

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

Such a person is blessed – they have God's blessing on them and on all that they do.

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

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

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

What is acceptable to God is when we listen to His Word and put it into practice. Such a response will result in us controlling our tongue and temper (1:19, 26), not being self-centred but caring for others, and keeping ourselves holy in a fallen world. Obedience is what God desires (cf. 1 Sam 15:22-23a).

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

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

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

Not only are we to humbly receive God's Word for salvation, but we are to be doers of it – obeying the Lord. If we don't do what it says, then we don't have true faith, and we are deceiving ourselves.

Read James 1:22 – 2:13

Imagine a person coming into church, shabbily dressed and smelling of body odour. Or consider a family coming in with unruly kids who disrupt the service? What attitude would you have toward them? Would you talk to them? If they didn't come the next week how would you feel? [discuss]

In the context of church, when we make distinctions between people what are we doing? (2:1-4)
We are showing favouritism (or partiality – v.9), and are judging people with evil motives.

Besides the rich and the poor, what other common distinctions can we make between people at church which can lead to us treating them differently, which in turn causes us to be guilty of favouritism?
We can make distinctions between a "classy" person and a "nerd", between a white person and a dark person, between an old and young person, between a likeable person and an unlikable person, etc.

We constantly put labels on people; eg, that person is cold or warm, bossy or timid, smart or thick-headed, etc. What do you think of this in the light of James 2:1-4?

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

In James 2:5-7, in the case of honouring the rich and shunning the poor, what is pointed out?
Not only is it wrong to honour the rich and shun the poor because we are showing favouritism, but it doesn't make sense, for generally speaking, the ungodly rich are proud and arrogant, and are the ones who oppress us and give us a hard time for being a Christian. They even blaspheme Christ's name.

It may seem James is condemning the rich. Is he? What do you think he is saying? (2:5-7)
James is not condemning the rich. Instead, he is challenging us in relation to passing judgment. We are not meant to judge people according to whether they are rich or poor, or on any other basis. The only thing that matters is whether a person is "rich in faith"; ie, whether they trust and believe in Christ or not.

According to other parts of the Bible, how should we treat those who believe and don't believe?
Those who have faith in Christ are part of God's kingdom, and we are to love them as we would love Christ (cf. Acts 9:4 – what we do to other Christians is what we do to Christ). Those who don't have faith will perish, and our attitude should also be to love them, and to point them to Christ. Love is the key.

What are we actually doing when we judge others and show favouritism? (James 2:8-9)
We are sinning against God by breaking one of the most important commandments He has given us. We are also not being a doer of the word, and therefore, we are deluding ourselves (James 1:22).

Why is the commandment in James 2:8 called the "royal law"? (Matt 22:37-40)
This is because Christ our king has given it, and it's one of the most important commandments we have.

What does James teach us in 2:10-11? Why is this the case? What are we to conclude from this?
Whenever we break one of God's commandments, we have broken all of God's law. Consider a mirror. If it has a crack in it, the whole mirror is ruined and we throw it out, even though only a portion is actually damaged. In the same way, when we break one law, we have "damaged" the whole law, as it comes as a whole, and the end result is the same (whether we break one law or every law) – we have broken our relationship with God. What are we to conclude? Every sin is serious, including showing partiality.

In the light of God's law, how are we to live? (James 2:12-13)
We are to take God's law seriously and live as those who will be judged. However, a believer will not be judged for their sins (Rom 8:1), but be judged only in the sense of receiving rewards (1 Cor 3:10-15).

What lessons can we learn from James 2:13?
We, who are the recipients of God's mercy in Christ, are to be merciful to others, rather than judgmental. Favouritism is the result of judging and condemning others. Instead of this, let us be merciful to all.

What a great declaration: mercy triumphs over judgment? What is the supreme example of this?
When Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, He satisfied God's judgment against us because of our sins, and enabled us to receive God's mercy. Through Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment.

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

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

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

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

"Mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13)? How is this true in Jesus? How should this affect our life?

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

Read James 2:14-26

In 2:14 an important question is posed: "If a person claims to have faith but has no deeds [good works] can such faith save him?" The answer is given in vv. 15-17 & v. 26. What is it?

Faith without deeds (or works) is useless; as useless as wishing well a poverty-stricken person and not doing anything to help them. Faith without works is of no benefit; and it won't save you.

James' teaching here troubled Martin Luther (the great reformer of the 1500's). He thought the letter of James was an "epistle of straw"; not on a par with the rest of the New Testament. Why was this? Martin Luther felt that James was teaching "salvation by works alone", and therefore it contradicted Paul's clear teaching (and his own) that salvation is by faith alone.

Is Martin Luther right? Is James teaching "salvation by works alone"? Is he contradicting Paul? Since the Bible is inspired of God (2 Tim 3:16), there isn't a contradiction (as we shall see).

Compare James 2:24 with Romans 3:28. They may seem to contradict, but are James and Paul writing about faith and works in the same way? How are we to make sense of these two verses?

James and Paul were addressing two different issues. In Romans 3 Paul was showing that not even a Jewish person is made right with God by doing "works of the law" (ie, doing the Old Testament law), but only if they have faith in Jesus. James, on the other hand, was addressing the issue about those who say they have faith in Jesus, but there is no works to show for it. His point is that true faith is always evidenced by works; ie, there will be good deeds because people with true faith are doers of the word (1:22).

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

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

James never says that works without faith can save (cf. 2:24). What does this imply about faith?

Faith is essential to salvation. Thus, James wasn't teaching salvation by works.

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

One may boast that they have faith in Jesus, but how can that be verified. Only "good works" from following Jesus show that we genuinely have faith.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What good works should accompany faith?

Firstly, calling out to Jesus to save us (Rom 10:13); seeking to follow Jesus and do what He says; having fellowship with Christians and building each other up; sharing the Gospel with those about us, etc.

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

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

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

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

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

Faith is essential to salvation, but true faith always shows itself in the way we live. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. True faith shows itself in holy living and practical love for others.

Read James 3:1-3:12

One of the most distressing crises is a fire out of control. The destruction can be devastating. How can hurtful words have a similar impact? [discuss] Think back on things people have said to you that have stuck. Which have had the most effect – positive comments or negative comments?

Our tongues can cut and hurt each other, and leave deep wounds if used in the wrong way. James wants to remind us of the damage we can do, and the need to control our tongue.

In vv.1-2, James warns us to think twice before becoming a teacher of God's Word. What is the reason James gives, and why do you think this is the case?

Teachers of God's Word will be judged more strictly. Teachers must not only practice what they preach, but their main tool is the tongue, which is one of the hardest parts of the body to keep from sin (Prov 10:19). False teaching and hurtful words not only damage the teacher, but those under their care.

Read vv.3-5a. What do horses and ships have in common with the human body?

The whole horse and the whole ship are steered by a very small, but powerful, part. So too, the human life – our tongues can steer the course of our whole life and corrupt it. We must not underestimate its effect on both ourselves and others.

What do forest fires and the human tongue have in common? (vv.5b-6)

A small spark can be the cause of a raging, uncontrolled fire. So too our tongues – they can be the cause of great animosity, bitterness and hurtful words and feelings, and set the whole course of our life on fire.

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

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

How does James describe the tongue in v.6 & v.8? How does it poison people and relationships?

Our tongue is a world of restless evil, untameable, full of deadly poison, and can corrupt and destroy our whole life. With it we boast, lie, flatter, curse, hurt, gossip and deceive. It is like a devilish secret agent in our midst, a traitor that is always handing us over to the enemy.

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

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

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

The fruit that a tree bears shows what kind of tree it is. A bad spring (salt water) cannot produce good things (fresh water). In other words, what comes out of our mouths reflects what is deep within.

If no man can tame the tongue, what hope do we? Read Matthew 12:33-37 and discuss the solution that Jesus presents.

Our mouths simply speak what overflows from our hearts. Therefore, if we are having trouble with our tongues, we must go back and look at the spring from which the water flows. We must repent, draw near to God and ask Him to transform us from the inside out.

Read Ephesians 4:25 & 4:29-31. What do we do to the Holy Spirit when we misuse our tongues?

How should we use our tongues?

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

What instruction does Colossians 4:5-6 give us regarding our conversations?

Our words should be full of grace, not judgment or condemnation. Our tongue can destroy our witness to outsiders, and our fellowship with believers. *How can you be more gracious in your speech? [discuss]*

Discuss how you can use your tongue to bring healing and refreshment to others.

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

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

Revision: *What part of our body can cause great damage? What damage can it do? (James 3:4-6)?*

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

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

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

Read James 3:13-4:12

In this next section we will consider two ways to live. What did Jesus teach us? (Matt 7:13-14)

There are only two paths in life. There is the narrow path that leads to eternal life, but few are on this. We enter this path when we turn to Jesus and follow Him. There is also the wide path. Those on this path reject Jesus and choose to live life as they please. It heads for destruction and most are on this.

There are two ways to live, and we have a choice in regard to what wisdom we will live by. What are the two contrasting wisdoms presented in James 3:13-18? Where do they come from?

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

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

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

The wisdom we live by will be seen in the way we live (v.13). What does your life reveal about the wisdom you live by? Is it God's wisdom or man's wisdom? Consider Pro 3:5-6. What do we learn here?

We can either follow our ways (which is the wisdom of this world), or we can rely on God's wisdom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite the truth of James 4:4, no Christian is perfect. There are times (many times) when we commit adultery and provoke God's Spirit to jealousy. What redeeming truth do we read of in James 4:6? Though we sin by carrying out the desires of our flesh, God is so gracious; more than we can comprehend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He is double-minded; "unstable in all his ways" (1:8). Are you like this? We are to avoid this at all costs.

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

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

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

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

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

What does God promise if we submit to God, draw near to Him, and humble ourselves before Him (4:7-10)? The devil will flee from us, God will draw near to us, and God will lift us up.

Read James 4:13-5:11

Who needs to pay attention in 4:13?

James addresses those who confidently make plans without reference to God's purposes. They decide where and when they will go, how long they will stay, and seem assured of the outcome - to make money.

What is wrong with this type of attitude? (v.14-15)

Firstly, it is arrogant to act as if we are in control when God is. It reflects a lack of reliance on God. We don't even know what will happen tomorrow, let alone able to confidently plan for it (Prov 27:1, 19:21). Secondly, we fail to see life as it really is – short and temporary, like a "mist". We should be living with eternity in mind. Thirdly, it shows that we are living according to our will, rather than God's will.

In what ways can we be guilty of having a similar attitude? Discuss.

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

We should always be dependent on the Lord and take Him and His will into account in our planning. Our lives are in His hands, and we are meant to be living for His glory (1 Cor 10:31).

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

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

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

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

What have these people done? (5:2-6)

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

Why does James imply that they have been so foolish in what they have done?

They have failed to live in light of the future. They are accumulating things in the last days (v.4) that have no lasting value (rotted, eaten, corroded). Furthermore, their selfishness and oppression have not gone unnoticed by the Lord. Judgement is coming, and they should be living now in light of it.

In what ways can we be like these rich people? Discuss.

In light of the approach of the Final Day, how should we view and use our wealth? Discuss.

Who does James now address in verses 7 & 10, and how are they reacting to their situation (v.9)?

James now addresses the poor who are being cheated and oppressed. They are reacting by grumbling and complaining (v.9). While their grievances might be genuine, grumbling is not a godly reaction, but a misuse of the tongue (3:9). It is also playing the judge by telling God what He ought to do (4:12).

How does James urge the poor and oppressed to respond and why (vv.7-9)?

James does not encourage them to go on "strike", or start a revolution. Instead, He urges them to be patient and stand firm in the face of suffering, because the Lord is coming soon and will judge justly.

It can be tempting for us to grumble against the rich. Why does James warn against this?

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

What examples does James quote in vv.10-11 of patience in the face of suffering?

Consider the prophets of old who endured much hardship in speaking for the Lord, but now are richly blessed (eg Jeremiah!). And consider Job – who after persevering through great suffering, was blessed of God (Job 41:10-12a). Remember, your present suffering is not the end of the story – God will bring blessing out of your situation, because He is full of compassion and mercy (1:2-4, 1:12).

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

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

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

How are we to be when we don't have much and we are limited in what we can plan? (5:7-10)

We're to be patient for our reward is coming, and we're not to grumble against those who are "better off".

Read James 5:12-20

James has had much to say about the tongue in his letter. What have we learnt thus far (1:19, 2:12, 3:8-10, 4:11, 5:9), and what else do we learn in 5:12?

We are to listen more than we speak, we will give an account of each word we have spoken, we are to control our tongue, we are not to speak against each other, we are not to grumble and complain, and also, we are not to make oaths, but simply speak the truth always (cf. what Jesus taught us in Matt 5:33-37).

In 5:13-15 we have instructions in what we should do in various circumstances. What are they?

If we're in trouble, we are to pray for God loves to help us (eg, Psa 50:14-15). If we're happy, we are to praise the Lord (eg, Psa 106:1). If we're sick, we are to call the elders and have them pray and anoint us.

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

Firstly, what type of sickness do you think James may be addressing: any type of sickness?

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

Although there are general sicknesses as a result of being in a fallen world, is there evidence in the Bible for sicknesses from God as a result of sin? (cf. Psa 38:1-7, 41:4, 1 Cor 11:27-32)

There is evidence that some sicknesses (not all) are from God due to sin, and can even lead to death (5:20).

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

James has challenged his readers about sin – being judgmental, a friend of the world, uncontrolled with the tongue, etc. As a result, there was the possibility of some being sick due to them not confessing their sins.

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

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

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

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

What is the promise if we should obey this instruction?

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

James gives the example of Elijah. How does that relate to what is mentioned in vv.14-16?

The drought was due to sin, and the rain came (healing) after the people turned back to the Lord.

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

The prayer of a righteous person (one who is in Christ and has no unconfessed sin in their life) is powerful and productive. We may be an ordinary believer (so was Elijah – v.17a), but we are never to underestimate what God can do if we would pray to Him by faith; that includes praying for the sick.

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

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

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