



Small Group Leaders Notes
James

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Introduction to James

Who was James?

1:1

Who was James writing to?

1:1

The 'Problems' with James

§1 "Epistle of Straw"

"St. James's epistle is really a right strawy epistle, compared to these others [Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, and 1 John], for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." (Luther)

"James seems to have precious little to say about Jesus. Jesus is explicitly mentioned only twice." (Sam Allberry)

§2 His style is different to Paul

§3 Does James contradict Paul *Romans 3:28 and James 2:14*

What is James all about?

Running through the letter is an important question, "***Are we devoted to God or double-minded?***"

(1:8, 2:1, 4:4, 4:8, 5:19-20)

Digging into James

With this big idea in place we can now dive into the book. Look up the following passages. For each passage;

1) **What does it look like to be Double-Minded?**

2) **What will it look like to be devoted to God?**

1:5-8

3:13-18

1:22-25

4:1-3

1:26

4:7-10

1:27

4:11-12

2:1-3

4:13-17

2:14-17

5:1-6

3:9-12

5:9

Do you notice any repeated themes through the letter?

A warning for us - *James 1:22-25*

An encouragement for us - *James 1:5*

James 1:1-8

“22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.” (James 1:22-25)

Small Group Bible studies are not book clubs where we come to merely discuss and debate what we have read. Our Bible studies must always lead towards action as we respond to God’s word. We come together to “look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom” and then we try to act upon what we have heard.

As leaders we need to be those who have looked intently into God’s word and then be those who are seeking to do what it says. We lead our groups not just by asking questions and guiding a discussion but by leading in application and obedience.

Whether you are going to use both the notes and the pre-prepared questions or write your own questions our aim must be to lead our groups towards real application. This is not easy and we may feel daunted by the task. If that is how you feel as you begin to prepare then James has a wonderful encouragement for you...

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” (James 1:5)

Background and Context

- ***Who was James? (v1)***
 - There are a number of different people called James mentioned in the New Testament. The common consensus is that this letter was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. James had not been a believer in Jesus (John 7:11) but became a believer after he saw the risen Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7.) He went on to become a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13.)
 - If James was the half-brother of Jesus then why does he introduce himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”? Why does he not describe himself as “James, the brother of Jesus”? James has come to realise that the spiritual connection he now has with Jesus trumps any biological connection he has. To be a servant of Jesus is a far greater privilege than to be a sibling of Jesus.
- ***Who was he writing to? (v1)***
 - “The twelve tribes scattered among the nations” was a way of describing the Jewish people during their exile from the Promised Land. In the New Testament this language of being scattered amongst the nations is applied to Christians (both Jewish and Gentile believers.) See 1 Peter 1:1 for example. James’ letter is therefore for all believers everywhere.
- ***What trials were they facing?***

- James starts of his letter by telling believers to “Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds...” From the rest of the letter we can see something of the range of trials that his readers might have been experiencing (e.g. Temptation - 1:13, Poverty - 1:9, Injustice - 2:1-7, Conflict - 4:1, Sickness - 5:14.)
- We don’t need to be too specific about exactly what trial they were facing because James speaks of “trials of many kinds.” Trials will come in all shapes and sizes. We will all face different sort of trials at different stages of life. This means that whatever the trials we may face, James is speaking to us.

Structure

- After the brief introduction in v1 the rest of the passage falls neatly into two sections linked by the theme of trials;
 - Joy in Trials (v1-4)
 - Wisdom in Trials (v5-8)

Notes

- **Joy in Trials (v1-4)**
 - **“Consider”** - James doesn’t tell us to “pretend” trials are pure joy, nor does he tell us to “feel” that treasures are pure joy. Consider is a **thinking** word not a **feeling** word. We do not have to always go round with a smile on our faces. Trials are difficult and painful. They are not enjoyable in and of themselves. What James wants us to do is change the way that we **think** about trials.
 - **“Whenever you face trials of many kinds”** - the implication of this is that trials are a normal part of life for Christians. James doesn’t say, “If you face trials” he says “Whenever you face trials.” Trials will come and as we have already mentioned they will come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. When we think of trials we shouldn’t just think of physical suffering. We can face relational and social trials. We can face financial trials. We can face trials at home or at work. There are all sorts of different trials and difficulties that we might face as we go through life.
 - **“the testing of your faith produces perseverance”** - The imagery here is of working out and physical training. As Sam Allberry says;

“It is suffering that proves, strengthens and deepens our faith. Faith is a little like a muscle in the human body. It is as it is worked out that it grows. It needs something to push against. Physical training is a painful and sweaty process. The Hollywood actor preparing to play the superhero does not become ready by lazing around and being inactive. Muscle growth requires discomfort. Faith needs the pushback of trials for us to grow spiritually. Trials and difficulties are an opportunity to cling on to the promises of God more tightly.”

- **“So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”** - God’s purpose in bringing trials into our lives is that we would develop perseverance/ stamina and the result of this is that we might become spiritually mature, complete in Christ-likeness. God wants to make us more and more like Jesus in our character and behaviour and he uses trials to achieve this. It is only as we remember what God is achieving through our trials that we will consider them pure joy. We need to remind ourselves of what we know (v3) in order to consider trials pure joy (v2.)
- This also raises the question of whether we want what God wants? God wants to make us spiritually mature and complete, but is that what we long for? What is more

important to us, spiritual growth or a trouble-free life? If we struggle to consider trials as pure joy, could it be because we are not really bothered about growing spiritually?

- **Wisdom in Trials (v5-8)**

- ***“If any of you lacks wisdom”*** - It might seem as if James has moved onto a new subject but he hasn't. Trials and confusion often go hand in hand. In difficult times we often don't see clearly and don't know how we should respond to what is happening.
- ***“You should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault...”*** - Here is a wonderful promise to us in our trials. We are to ask God for wisdom and he will provide the wisdom we need. James encourages us to ask God for wisdom by reminding us that God is generous and gracious (not finding fault) to all his people. This is very similar to the way Jesus describes the Father in **Matthew 7:11**. When faced with trials God does not expect us to cope in our own strength and wisdom. He loves it when his children depend on him and ask for help and he richly provides the wisdom we need.
- ***“...and it will be given”*** - At this point someone might say, *“I asked for wisdom but I did not feel any wiser. I still didn't know what to do in that difficult situation.”* In response to this we need to see that v5 is a promise. God will give wisdom to his people but it does not mean that we will suddenly feel awash with wisdom. As Sam Allberry says, *“There is a difference between receiving wisdom and feeling wise.”* God's wisdom can guide us in our decisions and protect us from folly even if we do not feel confident that we know the best thing to do.
- ***“You must believe and not doubt... such a person is double-minded”*** - These verses could be very discouraging if read wrongly. If James is saying that we must never waver in our faith then none of us can expect to receive anything from God. But the key to these verses is to understand exactly what James means by “Doubt” and “Double-minded.” James uses these two words to describe the same person. Derek Prime describes the double-minded doubting person as someone trying to ride two horses at once. The doubting person James is talking about is therefore someone who is looking to God for wisdom but also looking to the world for wisdom. The doubting double-minded person has split loyalties. They're two-faced. They're hedging their bets. They're trying to live towards God and towards the world at the same time (see 4:4-10.) In contrast we are to believe, that is we are to believe not only that God gives wisdom but that his wisdom is always best! We are to not just ask God for wisdom but then to be devoted to going his way, however difficult that may be. If we are genuinely seeking to go God's way then we can trust that he will give us the wisdom we crave.

Big Idea - When facing trials consider them pure joy as you remember God's purpose and trust him for wisdom.

Applications

- ***Think differently about trials*** - We cannot change our feelings but we can change our thinking. We need to see trials as God sees them by remembering God's purpose in trials (v3.) This is where we can help one another. When we see one another going through trials we are to lovingly draw alongside and helpfully remind one another of God's word.
- ***Do you want what God wants?*** - God's goal is to make us spiritually mature and like Christ. Is this your ambition? Do we value and treasure this more than our comfort and ease? If not then we will never be able to consider trials pure joy. We need to pray that God would change our priorities and ambitions so that they are more aligned to his will for us.
- ***Remember how good and generous a Heavenly Father you have*** - This lies below the surface of the whole passage. We are reminded of God's wonderful gracious generosity in v5 and this is to motivate us to ask God for wisdom. Remembering God's goodness is also key in the midst of trials. We need to remember that even in the toughest times God is our good and loving heavenly father who really is working all things for our good. The trials that he brings into our lives may not be pleasant but he still has good purposes for us.
- ***Wholeheartedly ask God for wisdom... and then follow it*** - Are you trying to ride two horses at once? Are you trying to go both God's way and the world's way? Are you asking God for wisdom but also then relying on worldly wisdom? In our trials let us wholeheartedly ask God for the wisdom we so desperately need and then wholeheartedly seek to walk in God's ways.

Questions

Starter Questions

1) James talks about “trials of many kinds.” When we hear the word “trials” what sorts of things come to mind?

There is no right or wrong answer to this question. The aim is to get people talking about trials. As James himself says, there are many kinds of trials. Help the group to see that we can face medical, social, relational and economic trials. We can face trials in our families or peer groups or at work. Help the group to see that our different circumstances will present different trials. For example the trials that a young single woman faces will be different to a married man. Similarly the trials we face when we are young may not be the same as those we face when we are older.

Focus on v1-4

2) James tells us to ‘consider it pure joy’ when we face trials. How realistic does that seem?

At first that sounds pretty unrealistic doesn't it! It can sound as if James is telling us to be happy that we are suffering. The group might pick up on the important word ‘consider’. James is not talking about how we feel about trials he is talking about how we think about trials. If the group are struggling to see this then you can use the following optional questions to help them see what James is and is not saying.

Optional Question 2a) Do you think James is saying that we must always put on a happy face? What does it mean to consider trials pure joy?

You don't have to use these optional questions but some or all of them may help the group to see that James is talking about our thinking not our feelings.

3) How can v3-4 help us to think positively about trials?

Once the group has understood what it means to ‘consider’ trials as joy we can now go on to v3-4 which give us the reasons to consider trials as pure joy. Notice how verse 3 starts with ‘because’ linking v3 with v2. Notice as well that James reminds us of what we ‘know’. Again the focus is on our thinking not our feelings. We need to remember what God uses trials to achieve.

Optional Question 3a) What does God want most for us? How is this different to what we want? How does God use trials to achieve his purposes for us?

God's desire for each of his people is to make us spiritually mature and perfectly Christ-like. God uses trials to grow our spiritual stamina which is what we need to grow in maturity and become more and more like Jesus. Let's be honest this often isn't our ambition is it? We would much rather have a comfortable easy life and so when trials come we don't instinctively consider them pure joy. We need to be reminded that God is our loving heavenly father who wants what is best for us. He knows best and so if he brings trials into our lives it will be for our good.

Focus on v5-8

4) When facing trials we often don't know what to do. How should we respond?

Here's a simple little question that anyone can answer by reading the first half of v5.

5) Look at how God is described in v5. How will the details encourage us to pray?

Encourage the group to dwell on each detail of how God is described;

1st - He gives generously. That is at the very heart of the gospel. God generously gave his Son for us. If he gave Jesus for us then we can trust that he really is the most generous Heavenly Father we could imagine.

2nd - He gives to all - He gives generously to all his people, not just a special few. Again this is right at the heart of the gospel. God's generosity is for all, not just a special few.

3rd - He gives without finding fault - Isn't this wonderful? Again God's grace is at the heart of the gospel. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve but lavishes undeserved grace upon us. God is not Santa he doesn't only answer the prayers of those who are on his good list. He graciously gives wisdom to all his people no matter our failings!

As we dwell on these truths they will warm our hearts and encourage us to pray particularly when we're facing trials. In difficult times we need to remember just what a wonderful gracious generous Heavenly Father we have!

6) What is the warning in v6-8?

We're warned not to doubt as we ask. This comes as a bit of a bombshell. If James is saying that anyone who has ever had even a fibre of doubt won't receive anything from God then what hope have any of us got. The key is to see that 'double-minded' helps to explain what James means by 'doubt.'

Optional Question 6a) How does 'double-minded' (v8) help us to understand what James means by 'doubt' (v6)?

The illustration of the person trying to ride 2 horses or run in two directions at once might help. Help the group to see that the double-minded person is asking God for wisdom but also looking to the world for wisdom. James is encouraging us to be wholehearted in seeking God's wisdom and then wholehearted in obeying God's wisdom.

Applying the Passage

This might be best done in smaller groups of 2 or 3 to enable people to speak more freely. Although the following questions are quite personal we want to be fostering a culture of walking alongside one another through trials. You will need to think carefully about how you divide up the group. You might want to keep the groups single sex or let people choose who they go with.

However you do the application make sure that you spend time praying for one another after the study. One of the big clear applications is to pray for wisdom so let's do that.

7) Is there a particular trial that you face where you need wisdom and help to consider it pure joy?

8) What good things might God be doing in you through this trial?

9) Spend time praying for one another and the trials you face.

James 1:9-18

Context

- **Double-minded** - This is James' big concern in the letter (1:8 & 4:8.) He writes to urge believers to be whole-hearted for Jesus. To be double-minded is to be friends with the world (4:4) which means we can't be friends with God. In this passage we are to be whole-hearted in persevering under trials and resisting temptation. There is a danger that we view our poverty or wealth from the world's perspective rather than from God's perspective that comes through the gospel.
- **Patience in Trials** - This is the big link from 1:1-8 to this passage. James has shown us that God uses trials to develop our spiritual stamina which leads to spiritual maturity and completeness (1:3-4). Persevering in trials continues in these verses as James shows us that they also lead us to the crown of righteousness that God has prepared for his people (1:12.) James will return to the theme of patience at the end of the letter (5:7-11) this suggests that he sees this as a key mark of being devoted to God. Those who are double-minded will not persevere through trials.
- **Poverty & Riches** - It might seem like James has switched from talking about trials to talking about money but poverty can be a very difficult trial. James therefore hasn't changed topic in v9-11. James will revisit the themes of poverty and riches at other points in the letter (2:1-7, 2:15, 5:1-6).
- **Jesus' Teaching** - Throughout James' letter there are echoes of Jesus' teaching and specifically the Sermon on the Mount. This passage echoes Jesus' teaching on treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-24), the goodness and generosity of God (Matthew 7:9-11) and the human heart as the source of sin (Luke 6:43-45.)

Structure

- **The link between trials and temptations** - At first sight James seems to jump around from topic to topic in his letter but on closer inspection there are often links. So often when we are facing trials we also experience particular temptations. For example, if we are poorer than other people then we might be tempted to envy richer people and covet what they have.
- There are therefore two parts to this passage but there is a clean link between the two;
 - v9-12 - Persevere through the Trials of Poverty and Wealth
 - v13-18 - Resisting Temptation and giving thanks to God

Notes

- **Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position (v9)**
 - Notice first that this is talking about believers not people in general. James is not saying there is something intrinsically good about being poor.
 - Believers in Jesus Christ may be in a materially or socially humble position but spiritually they have a high position. Even the poorest Christians has been enriched with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3.) This is what we need to hold onto when we are facing financial trials. The world may look down on us because we don't have much money but in Christ we are spiritually rich beyond our wildest imagination.

- ***But the rich should take pride in their humiliation (v10)***
 - The world looks up to those who are rich but rich believers need to remember that we did not earn or pay for our salvation. It is so easy for rich people to be defined by their wealth.
 - The gospel is incredibly humbling, especially for those who are rich. It tells us that we are only Christians because God took mercy on us and gave us a spiritual handout! If we are rich Christians we must remember that we are only Christians because of God's charity!
- ***The rich will pass away like a wild flower... the rich will fade away even while they go about their business (v10-11)***
 - It is worth re-reading these verses to notice the subtlety of what James is saying. He is not just saying that **riches** fade away (Matthew 6:19), he is going a step further and saying **the rich** themselves will fade away.
 - Money makes us feel safe, secure, permanent. It can lull us into a false sense of security where we think that we are anchored and with a solid foundation for the future. James reminds us that even the rich are like wild flowers that spring up one minute and are scorched the next. As Isaiah 40 and 1 Peter 1 tell us;

“All people (even the rich) are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field, the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures for ever.”

- ***Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” (v12)***
 - James reminds us again of how God uses trials for his good purposes. Notice again how trials produce perseverance (1:3). Spiritual stamina is clearly something to be prized and desired, not only because it produces maturity (v4) but all because it means we will finish the race and receive the crown of life that God has waiting for his people (v12.)
 - Whether we are rich or poor we need to keep sight of this. There is something far greater than earthly riches awaiting us! This perspective needs to constantly shape how we view our finances and our status because the world will tell us that everything depends on our bank balance.
- ***The source of all temptation and sin (v13-15)***
 - We have already seen the link between trials and temptations. Notice that James doesn't say “If tempted...” but rather “When tempted...” Temptation is a normal part of Christian experience.
 - When temptation comes we immediately look to blame someone or something other than ourselves. We can easily blame God “He made me like this...” He put me in this trial/situation...” James reminds us that sin has no appeal to God whatsoever. God is never to blame for our temptation.
 - We need to face an uncomfortable truth, “my circumstances may be the occasion for my sin, but they are never the cause of it” (Allberry.) Temptation comes from the sinful desires of my heart. A favourite illustration of this is to shake a glass of water. When you shake the glass the water comes out. Why did water come out of the glass when it was shook? Answer - because there was water in the glass to start with.

- James also wants us to see the danger of playing with temptation and sin. This isn't a harmless pet, rather it is a wild animal that drags us away (v14) and once fully grown it leads to death! (v15.)
- ***The source of all good things (v16-18)***
 - We mustn't be deceived either about the source and consequences of temptation (v13-15) or of the source of all goodness (v17-18.) God is not responsible for any temptation or sin but he is responsible for every good thing we enjoy. Every single good thing we enjoy comes from God. Dwell on that for a few minutes. Make a list of all the good things you have enjoyed so far today and give thanks to your Heavenly Father for his goodness and kindness.
 - God is completely unchanging, he is always perfectly good and pure, he never has a bad day, he never tempts, he is constant.
 - As we give thanks to God for all that we enjoy James wants us to remember the very best thing that God has given to us - new life! We have been "born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23-24.) Again we mustn't be deceived. The world tells us the best things we can enjoy are the things that we can see here and now (possessions, family and friends.) These are wonderful things but there is something even better - new birth and the crown of life!
 - It's worth thinking about the connection between v17-18 and v9-11. The more we remember the goodness of God, the surpassing gift of eternal life, and what it took for God to give it to us... the more it will help us to have the right perspective on earthly poverty or riches.

Tricky Bits

- ***Should Christians really be proud? Isn't pride sinful?***
 - Romans 3:27 tells us that the gospel gives us no room for boasting so how can James tell believers to boast? Surely boasting is sinful? The key is to look at what James tells believers to take pride in.
 - James is not telling us to boast in ourselves (this is opposed to the gospel.) He is telling us to boasting in the gospel and what God has done for us. The believer in humble circumstance is to take pride in the high spiritual position that God has given them through Jesus.
 - Again James tells the rich not to boast in their wealth which is fleeting but in the gift that God has given them.
 - If we are still struggling with the idea of 'boasting/taking pride' then think of it as where we get our identity and sense of worth from. James is saying, "Don't get your sense of value from your bank balance, get your identity from what Jesus has done for you." Think of yourself first and foremost as a Christians not wealthy or poor.
- ***Are riches a trial?***
 - James does not explicitly say that the rich in v10 are believers but the contrast with believers in humble circumstances suggests that the rich in v10 are believers.
 - James says that trials test our faith (v3 and v12.) It is easy to see how poverty can test our faith but riches can equally test our faith. When we are rich we can trust our wealth rather than God. We can easily get our identity and status from the money and possession we have rather than the gospel. This is a very different trial to poverty, but then there are many kinds of trials (v2.)

- ***Is the crown of life a reward that we earn? (v12)***

- We must remember that we only love God because he first loved us (1 John 4:19.) This then is not something we earn but a gift that we receive.
- James wants us to see that as tough as our trials are they will not last. One day they will end and after that we will receive the crown of life which will never end. This is all part of James helping us to have the right perspective on our trials - they are tough, but they won't last, so keep going!

Big Idea - Persevere through trials and temptations by focusing on the gospel!

Applications

- **Whether rich or poor see yourself as God sees you, not as the world sees you**
 - We so easily adopt the world's outlook on poverty and wealth. Instead we need to keep remembering the gospel and getting our sense of identity and worth from the gospel not our wallets.
- **Keep trusting God through trials**
 - This is what it means to persevere. Not just gritting our teeth, but continuing to look to God through our trouble. Trusting God will look different depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in.
 - Those who are poor need to keep trusting God to provide day by day and trusting that he will bring them through and give them the crown of life.
 - Those who are rich need to keep believing that all that they have is a gift from God. They need to keep remembering that all their earthly treasures are worth nothing compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.
- **Beware succumbing to temptations in trials**
 - In hard times we can often be susceptible to temptation. If we have money worries we can be tempted to stop trusting God, to worry sinfully, and to envy others. If we are rich we can also be tempted to stop trusting God, we can become proud in our wealth, and we can be tempted to be stingy and ungenerous.
- **Don't be deceived about the sources of temptations and blessings**
 - We mustn't blame God for temptation, we need to honestly recognise that we are to blame for our sin.
 - We must also not be deceived about wealth. Whatever we have is ultimately from God. The world tells us that we have what we have because of us. James reminds us that everything we have is a gift. We also need to not be deceived by how riches seem. They seem to be eternal but really they are fleeting. They also seem to be the best thing but the very best thing is the gift of eternal life.
- **Give thanks to God for all the good things he gives you**
 - There are so many things in this passage that we can use as springboards for thanksgiving.
 - If we are poor we can give thanks that through Jesus we are spiritually rich.
 - If we are rich we can give thanks for God's charity to us!
 - Whatever trials we face we can give thanks that they will not go on forever and that God has promised his people the crown of life.
 - We can thank God that though our sin deserves death he has given us life through Jesus.

- We can give thanks for every good thing that we enjoy remembering that the best gift of all is new birth.
- We can thank God that he does not change and so we can trust him and his goodness to us through the changing circumstances of life.

Bible Study Questions

Starter Question - How do people normally view the rich and the poor?

In this passage the gospel is going to radically challenge the way we think about our material possessions. It is good to start by thinking about how the world sees such things. How do we instinctively view people who are rich or poor? How do we think of ourselves?

Often riches are something to take pride in whilst poverty is seen as shameful. To be rich is a good thing whereas to be poor is a disaster.

Focus on v9-12

1) James says that there are many kinds of trials that test our faith.

a) How can poverty be a trial that tests our faith?

There might be all sorts of answer to this. Poverty can make us anxious, we can doubt God's love and provision for us.

b) In what different ways might being comfortable and well-off be a trial that tests our faith?

It may be that people have never thought of being rich as a trial so try and help them to think of ways that we are less likely to trust God when we are materially comfortable. The richer we are the less likely we are to trust God to provide what we need. Riches can also give us a false sense of security.

2) As Christians we are to take pride in what God has done for us in the gospel not our circumstances.

a) In what way does the gospel encourage poorer believers?

This question is really focused on the praise "high position." In what ways do believers enjoy a high spiritual position? You could go to Ephesians 1:3-4 or 2:4-6 if the group is really struggling.

b) In what way does the gospel humble richer believers?

Our material wealth counts for nothing before God. If we are believers it is only because of God's grace and charity to us! That is very humbling for the rich who are so used to being able to buy everything for themselves.

3) What will it look like for poorer believers to persevere? How should richer believers persevere?

It might be easier to think of how poorer believers will persevere. For them it is about continuing to trust God and to get their sense of value and pride from the gospel rather than being discouraged or anxious because of their poverty.

For the rich perseverance will mean continuing to be humble. Not boasting in material wealth but remembering that it is temporary.

Focus on v13-18

4) Trials and temptations often go together.

1) What temptations can we face when we have money worries?

Anxiety, greed, envy and coveting can all be temptations.

2) What temptations can we face when we are comfortable?

We can be tempted to feel proud, self-sufficient and selfish rather than generous.

5) How might we be deceived as we think about these temptations?

Firstly we can think that these temptations are no big deal but we need to remember that temptation is the start of a very dangerous chain (v14-15.) Secondly we can be tempted to blame God when really we need to see that we are to blame not God.

6) There are lots of good things that we enjoy. How might we be deceived as we enjoy them?

We can be tempted to think that they are ultimate and will last forever when they like our lives are fleeting. We can also easily forget where every good thing comes from.

7) Praying for perseverance through the trials of wealth and poverty. Give thanks for all the good things that we enjoy

This would be an obvious and fruitful way to end our time together.

James 1:19-27

Context

- **The word of truth** - We were introduced to God's life-giving word in v18. Although the NIV starts a new section at v19 the theme of God's word continues in this passage. We are to humbly receive the word planted in us (v21) and we do this by not only listening to the word but then doing what it says (v22-25.)
- **Faith in action** - This is a theme that James introduces in these verses and develops in 2:14-26. James is not saying that actions are a substitute for faith. Instead he is saying that true faith will always be seen in our actions. In this way he is echoing the words of Jesus (Matthew 7:21-29.)
- **Speech** - So much of James' teaching is about how we speak (1:19, 3:1-12, and 4:13-17.) How we speak is a vital part of the spiritual battle and yet is often neglected to our cost.

Structure

- God's word, and specifically obeying God's word gives this passage its structure.
- Having introduced God's word in v18 we are then told to humbly accept God's word planted in us (v19-21.)
 - But how do we humbly accept the word planted in us? James answers that for us in v22-25. We humbly accept the word planted in us by not merely listening to the word but doing what it says.
 - This then raises a further question - what does God's word tell us to do? James gives us a summary in v26-27.

Notes

- **v19-21 - "Listen to God's word..."**
 - This is not just some fortune cookies advice that James is offering. James says this to people who are going through all sorts of trials (1:2-12.) When going through difficult times it is particularly important that we are quick to listen to God's word as it is only God's word that can give us the perspective that we need on trials. When facing trials or temptations we will be quick to blame God if we are slow to listen to his word.
 - The context makes it clear that James is specifically talking about listening to God's word and not just general advice. See how v19 comes sandwiched between v18 and v21 which are both about God's word.
 - In some ways what James is describing in v19-20 is the right sort of soil that the word of God needs if it is to produce the righteousness that God desires. If we are slow to listen and quick to get angry then God's word will produce little fruit in our lives.
 - Being quick to speak so often goes hand in hand with getting angry. When we slow down and listen it also helps us to calm down and not get angry.

- God wants his people to produce the fruit of righteousness in our lives and to get rid of all moral filth and evil (v20-21.) We do this as we listen to and humbly accept the word planted in us. The more we listen to God's word the better equipped we are to live the lives of righteousness and purity that God desires.
- **v22-27 - "... But don't just listen to God's word... do what it says!"**
 - God's word is planted in us (21) but that does not mean that we are to be passive like soil (v22.) We are to be active on obeying what God says to us.
 - God's word is like a mirror that shows us ourselves (v23-24.) What matters with a mirror isn't the look, but the action that we take as a result of the look. So we shouldn't come to the Bible primarily to help us understand other people or the world around us. We come to the Bible so that it can show us what we are like and how we need to change. Is this reflected in our Bible study application? Or do we often spend more time applying the passage to other people rather than specifically to ourselves?
 - The important thing about God's word is not how much we know, but how much we have obeyed. It is great to know our Bible's really well but it is even better to obey our Bible's really well.
 - Verse 25 provides us with the motivation to obey God's word. We don't obey to earn our salvation, that comes through believing the gospel. We obey God's word because God's word is perfect and obeying it brings freedom and blessing. Our sinful hearts tell us that obedience will limit our freedom, but true freedom is found in obeying God because that is what we were made for. This means that we should never resent God's word when it challenges us to change our behaviour. When God's word corrects us it may not be comfortable but it is for our freedom and good.

Tricky Bits

- **What does James mean by human anger? (v19-20)**
 - James is contrasting human anger with God's righteous anger. Our anger is often sinful and selfish, whereas God's anger is always righteous and pure. We are capable of righteous anger but it is never perfectly pure, it is always tainted with sin.
- **Why does James focus on our speech and caring for orphans and widows (v26-27)? What have they got to do with listening well to God's word and keeping oneself from being polluted by the world?**
 - I think that James sees our speech and our care for the vulnerable as examples of keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world. We have to remember the time when James was writing. There was no welfare state, no safety net, no organised care for the vulnerable. If you couldn't provide for yourself then you were completely reliant on family to look after you. If you had no family then you would be in dire straits. In contrast to the rest of society Christians were quick to step in and care for vulnerable orphans and widows. This was a powerful demonstration of the love of God in the gospel.
 - Whilst our society is very different to the 1st century Christians are still called to show particular care for the vulnerable whoever they may be. We are not just to look after our own, but to care for all those who are in distress as a demonstration of God's care for us.

Big Idea Listen to God's word... but don't just listen to it... obey it!

Applications

- This passage revolves around a big question - "How do you listen to God's word?"
 - Are you a good listener? What is a good listener? Are you someone who rushes your daily time with God's word or do you slow down and give yourself time and space to think about and respond to God's word?
 - What about listening to sermons on Sundays? What can you do so that you don't forget what you have heard? What practical steps can you put in place that will help you to be obedient to what you have heard?
 - What does this passage mean for Bible studies in Home Group? What could you do before, during and after the study to help you be slow to speak, quick to listen and eager to obey?

Questions

Starter - “Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak.” In what sort of situations do we find this especially hard? What tends to happen when we are quick to speak and slow to listen?

There might be all sorts of situations where we find this hard. In most situations being quick to speak and slow to listen leads to anger and things only getting worse.

1) We don't just need to be quick to listen to each other. James is writing specifically about listening to God's word (v18, v21, v22.) What can be some of the dangers or difficulties of listening to God's word? (v22-25)

It can be so easy to deceive ourselves and think that simply because we've heard God's word that is enough. Talk about how we can easily just listen to God's word on Sundays or Homegroups or personal Bible reading. We can easily deceive ourselves by thinking that growing in Bible knowledge is enough.

2) What does it look like to be someone who is a good listener to God's word?

In a word - obedience! Obedience will involve (v20) not becoming angry and (v21) getting rid of all moral filth. In other words obedience and sanctification/growing in holiness go together.

3) What practical steps can we take to be better listeners to God's word?

To really help application specifically focus on listening to sermons or home group Bible studies. What helps you remember and obey what you've heard or read? Let's share advice and encourage one another to make practical changes. How terrible it would be to study a passage like this but then not go away and make changes in the light of it!

4) James was writing to people, like us, facing trials (v2) and temptations (v13.)

How will being quick to listen to God's word help us in these situations?

If time is short you could miss this question out. It's here to help us reflect on the big themes that James has addressed in chapter 1. When facing trials and temptations God's word gives us the perspective and guidance that we need. It stops us getting angry with God (v20) and it leads us in paths of righteousness (v21.)

5) Obeying God's word God's word brings blessing and freedom. Can you think of times when you have experienced this in your life?

a) How will that past experience encourage you to obey God now?

These two questions are not about us boasting or patting ourselves on the back. Instead we need to help one another see that obeying God really is for our best. It's not always easy and comfortable but it is for our good. We need to help dispel the lie that says that obeying God limits our freedom and is not good for us. That lie is all around us and our sinful hearts are quick to believe it.

6) God's word teaches us to control our tongues and care for the vulnerable. How will doing these things make us stand out from the pollution of the world?

This again can be an optional question if time is short. The aim of this question is to see ways in which the world often doesn't care for the vulnerable or keep a tight rein on its tongue. You might want to spend time thinking who are the vulnerable today and how can we be practically involved in caring for them.

Remember to finish by praying for God's help to obey what he has just taught us!

James 2:1-13

Context

- **“Keep yourself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27)** - Although James seems to jump around from topic to topic there is often a thread linking them together. James finished chapter 1 by urging us to not be polluted by the world. Favouritism is rife in the world but Christians are not to be polluted by such favouritism. Favouritism is one of the marks of being double-minded and friends with the world (4:4). As God’s people we are to reflect his character by caring for the vulnerable (1:27) and not discriminating against the poor (2:1-4.)
- **Riches and Poverty** - We have seen already that this is a big theme in the letter (1:9-11 and 5:1-6.) The world assesses people by the material wealth or poverty. As Christians we are to be more concerned about spiritual wealth and poverty (1:9-11.) We need to remember that it is only spiritual riches that will last and all that we have is a gift from God (1:17-18.) As believers we are spiritually rich because Christ became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9.)
- **God’s law gives freedom** - In chapter 1 James described God’s law as “the perfect law that gives freedom” (1:25). In chapter 2 he repeats this (2:12.) As James calls us to put our faith into action by obeying God’s law we need to remember that obeying God’s law is good for us and it is good for others. Life is found in obedience not disobedience. This echoes what Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30 - *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”*

Structure

Main Point - Don’t show favouritism (v1)

Example of Favouritism (v2-4)

Reason 1 - Favouritism goes against God’s Work (v5-7)

Reason 2 - Favouritism goes against God’s Law (v8-11)

Reason 3 - Favouritism goes against God’s Mercy (v12-13)¹

Notes

- **v1 - Don’t show favouritism**
 - James reminds us that as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ we must not show favouritism. He doesn’t just say ‘don’t show favouritism’ he reminds us who we are and who Jesus is. We believe in a glorious lord who does not show favouritism but offers salvation to rich and poor. It would therefore be a denial of the gospel to show favouritism.

¹ Sam Allberry highlights these three reasons in his book ‘James for you’

- **v2-4 - Example of Favouritism**

- It's not hard to think of a contemporary version of this example. We can easily show favouritism towards those who look nice and are similar to us. We can show favouritism by making a big fuss about a new young family but overlook the new old lady on her own. We can show favouritism by welcoming the British family who speak English but not giving the same welcome to a family of Romanians who don't speak much English.
- The world is forever showing favouritism and discriminating, but as believers in the Lord Jesus we are not to be polluted by the world (1:27.)

- **5-7 - Reason 1**

- James shows that favouritism goes against the way God operates. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29;

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.”

- This doesn't mean that the church is only full of poor people, nor does it mean that rich people cannot be saved. It is just that God often chooses the poor and lowly who have nothing to offer so that his grace might be gloriously displayed. When we look at the growth of the church around the world today it is often growing most in the poorest parts of the world.
- James shows the absurdity of these Christians favouring the rich because it is the rich who are the very ones giving Christians such a hard time. This reflects the gospels where it is the rich and powerful religious leaders who oppose and persecute Jesus but the poor and lowly who tend to flock to him.

- **v8-11 - Reason 2**

- James picks out the command to love our neighbours as ourselves. Jesus repeatedly teaches on this command (perhaps that is why James calls it the royal law.) If we show favouritism then we may be loving some of our neighbours but we are not loving all of our neighbours. We are drawing a line and saying “I will love and welcome this person... but not that person.” To love our neighbour means to love all our neighbours not just some of them.
- As God's people we are to obey all that God has said. Just because we are obeying God in one area of our lives is no excuse for disobeying him another part of our life.

- **v12-13 - Reason 3**

- James shows us that we are not just to show favouritism because God commands us not to show favouritism. We are also not to show favouritism because it goes against the mercy that God has shown to us. We are law-breakers and yet because of Jesus God has shown us mercy. How much more therefore should we want to show mercy and kindness in a way that reflects God's mercy and kindness to us?

Tricky Bits

- **Does God love poor people more than rich people? Are poor people in some way more deserving than rich people?**
 - In short, no! We must be careful that we don't fall into the trap of saying that God only cares about poor people. Similarly we mustn't say that because someone is poor they are not as in need of having their sins forgiven. Whether rich or poor our greatest needs is forgiveness of sins and new birth through Jesus.
 - As we discuss this passage the conversation may well turn to mercy ministries designed to meet the material needs of the poor. These are good and important things to do but we must remember that God's biggest concern is that people "be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom he has promised to those who love him" (v5.) Whether rich or poor, people need the gospel more than anything else.
 - James is wanting us to avoid thinking that reaching the rich or successful is somehow a better or more strategic ministry. Everyone needs to be reached with the gospel.
- **As Christians do we need to keep the whole of God's law?**
 - Reading v8-11 someone might say, "So why don't we keep all the Old Testament laws? Why don't we keep all the food laws and sacrifices?" This could easily sidetrack a study and move us away from what James is talking about. James is not saying that Christians have to keep all Old Testament sacrificial laws for example. There are many different approaches that Christians take to the Old Testament law but in this case it seems that James is focusing on God's moral laws such as loving your neighbour as yourself.
- **"Are Christians going to be judged by the law?"**
 - Again, having read v12-13, someone might say, "But I thought we have been saved from God's judgment by Jesus?" When believers stand before God they will not be condemned and punished for their sins because Jesus paid for all our sins on the cross. But God's law will still judge us in the sense that our lives will be assessed against the law. As James will show us in the rest of chapter 2, the faith that saves us is to be seen in our obedience to God. The question is, "will our lives reflect the faith that we profess?"

Big Idea - Christians shouldn't show favouritism because it goes against who we are and what God has done for us!

Application - Don't show favouritism!

- That's the big application. The key to applying this passage is to help the group see the ways in which we can all too subtly show favouritism as the world does. This is a passage where we could all too easily apply the passage to other people and how they have badly treated us, rather than applying it to ourselves. It might be worth re-reading 1:22 as a reminder that what we are reading in James is meant to change us!

Questions

I have purposefully kept the number of questions to a minimum. This is so that our studies are not too long giving plenty of time for application and prayer. You may want to supplement these questions with some of your own questions.

1) Last time James told us not to be polluted by the world (1:27.) In what different ways does the world show favouritism?

This question is designed to get the conversation going and to think about favouritism and discrimination. Sadly this is rife in almost every area of life so you shouldn't be short of ideas. Try to avoid the conversation getting too judgmental as we will soon see that we as believers can be just as bad.

2) How might we as a church be in danger of showing favouritism?

You could ask the group to come up with a contemporary version of v2-4. How might v2-4 play out at BEC on a Sunday morning? In what ways might we discriminate against the poor? What groups of people are we in danger of favouring? Which groups are we in danger of treating badly?

This could be a very emotive discussion. Some people might feel that they have been discriminated against by the church. We shouldn't silence such people but as leaders we do need to encourage the group to apply it to themselves and not just other people. We need to keep coming back to the question, "In what way are we in danger of showing favouritism?"

Where someone has been badly treated there will understandably be hurt. For them the challenge will be to show mercy and forgiveness (v13) even if they do not feel that it is deserved. Whether we been discriminated against or whether we are the ones who have discriminated, we need to live out the gospel.

3) Why is it so unacceptable for Christians to show favouritism?

Here we want to help the group unpack v5-7, 9-11 and v12-13. Some groups will require more help and steering to dig the reasons out of the passage. (See the notes section for help with the 3 reasons.) The following questions might help the group dig into these verses;

a) What has God done for us? How has he treated us?

b) What does God command us to do? Why is favouritism so serious?

James 2:14-26

Context

- **The importance of obedience in James' letter** - We have already seen how important it is that believers are obedient to God's word (1:22-27 and 2:1-13.) James is still on this theme in 2:14-26 and so this study will build upon and re-emphasise what we have seen in recent weeks.
- **Faith and Works in the New Testament** - People often think that this part of James contradicts what Paul teaches in Romans 3:21-28. As we will see in the 'Tricky Bit's below this is not the case but requires us to understand the slightly different ways in which James and Paul use the word 'faith.'
- **The Old Testament** - James draws on two examples from the Old Testament to make his point that faith without deeds is dead. The first example is Abraham who is credited with righteousness because he believed God's promises in Genesis 15:6. He then demonstrates this faith in God by being willing to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22. James' second example is Rahab in Joshua 2 who demonstrates her faith by sheltering the spies and covering for them when they came to spy out Jericho.
- **Being a friend of God** - Abraham was called God's friend (James 2:23; 2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8.) This might seem like a throwaway detail for James to include but it is an important theme in this letter. In 4:4 James returns to the theme of friendship saying that if we are friends with the world then we are enemies of God and double-minded (4:8.) Friends of the world think all that matters is what you say, it doesn't matter how you live. So a politician will make great speeches about state schools and then send their child to a private school. A friend of God will back up what they say they believe with their lifestyle.

Structure

Hopefully by laying the passage out like this we can see how James is making one important point all the way through. Like a fighter pilot he has one target but he keeps approaching it from different angles.

Question - What good is it to claiming to have faith but no deeds? (v14)

Example of a believer in need (v15-16)

James' big point - A profession of faith without action is dead (v17)

Objection - But aren't there two types of Christians? (v18)

Example of the demons (v19)

James' big point - Faith without deeds is useless (v20)

Example of Abraham (v21-23)

James' big point - You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do not just what they say they believe (v24)

Example of Rahab (v25)

James' big point - Faith without deeds is dead (v26.)

Notes

- ***“What good is it... if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds” (v14)*** - It could be that James has heard of people who were twisting the gospel and saying that having believed in Jesus they don't need to live out that faith. The key word in this verse is 'claim.' These people claim to have faith in Jesus but James is going to show that real, saving faith is always then seen in our actions. We are not saved by our actions. We are saved by our faith, but that saving faith will then act!
- ***The example of a needy Christian v15-17*** - James uses the example of a believer who is in need. As believers we are to care for and help one another when we are in need because we are now the family of God (Acts 2:45, Galatians 6:10.)
- ***The objection - “aren't there two types of Christians?” (v18)*** - James now imagines an objection to what he has just said. “Aren't there 'doctrine Christians' who love theology and Bible study and then 'Deed Christians' who get on and put their faith into practice?” Isn't it just a matter of opinion and taste? Aren't we all different? Shouldn't we each be allowed to follow our own form of Christianity?
- ***The example of the demons (v19)*** - The demons have perfectly orthodox theology! They believe all the right things about God. Just having orthodox theology does not save us. Notice that the Demons do something because of what they believe... they shudder!

- **The example of Abraham (v21-23)** - God credited Abraham with righteousness when Abraham believed God's promises in Genesis 15. Years later Abraham then demonstrated that faith in his actions when he was prepared to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22.) He was declared righteous because of his faith but his faith was made complete/put on display to be seen by being willing to offer Isaac. His actions in Genesis 22 fulfilled (filled out) the declaration of righteousness that he had received all those years before (v23.)
- **The example of Rahab (v25)** - Having made his point with the example of Abraham, the Father of the Jews, James now makes the same point with the example of Rahab who was a Gentile and a prostitute. James is making the point that God's way of salvation is the same for both Jews and Gentiles.
- **James Big Point - Faith without deeds is dead and useless (v14, 17, 20, 24 and 26.)** - Simply to claim to have faith in Jesus is not enough. Real faith will be seen in our deeds. James is not disagreeing with Paul (see the Tricky Bits for more on this.) Simply to have professed faith, prayed the prayer, said the creed, signed the statement of faith does not mean we are saved. We can do all those things and yet not have true saving faith. We know that we are truly saved and friends with God when we can see evidence of our faith in our actions. Notice how in v22 and v24 James uses the phrase, 'you see.' We can use that phrase to make a point, "you see, I'm right..." but I think James is using it differently. I think he means, "You can see that a person is righteous by what they do. You can see their faith on display through how they live. Our faith should be seen and not just heard.

Tricky Bits

- **Does James contradict Paul?**
 - To see why James does not contradict Paul we need to understand that they use the word faith slightly differently. When you compare Romans 3 and James 2 we find a subtle but important difference in how they use the word. In Romans 3 Paul means 'trust' when he uses the word 'faith.' He is therefore absolutely right to say that "righteousness is given through faith/trust in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21.)
 - James would not disagree with this at all! When James talks about faith in James 2 he does not mean 'trust' he means 'claims to trust.' We see that from the initial question in James 2:14. James is making the point that claiming to trust Jesus is not the same as trusting Jesus. If we really trust Jesus then we will show that through our behaviour.

Big Idea - Faith without deeds is dead, useless and cannot save (v14, 17, 20, 24, 27.)

Applications

- **Is the faith you profess demonstrated in the life you live?** If we claim to be God's family, united by Jesus, then can people see that through the way we care for and help one another? I would probably try and avoid getting into a long-winded debate about Christians, charity and humanitarian work. James' example focuses particularly on our care for believers in need whether that is in our own church family, country or around the world. In what ways can we be meeting the needs of other believers? Be careful that we don't just come up with applications for how other people should be caring for

believers. This is not an opportunity for finger pointing but rather honest examination of our own lives.

- **Think about the different types of people in your group?**

- There may be some believers in your group who have a very tender conscience and read a passage like this and immediately begin to doubt whether they really are believers. Such believers need loving reassurance. Help them see the ways that their faith is worked out in their lives. So often other people can see our faith in action better than we can see ourselves.
- On the other hand there may be believers who are complacent. Our assurance of faith does not come from our theology or a past profession of faith. Rather our assurance comes as we show that we are believers by our lives. As we apply this passage you could say that we want God's word to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.
- It may be that there are some in our groups who think that they are believers but who are not. It is not our job to pass judgment on who is and who is not saved (only God knows that.) It may be that God uses a passage like this to show somebody that they are not yet a believer despite what they might have previously thought. Where that is the case we will want to help them to come and put their faith in Christ and begin living for him.

Questions

Starter Question - How do you know if something is alive?

You could think of a tree or a person or an animal. What are the obvious signs of life? This study is all about what living faith looks like.

§1) What is James's big point in this passage? (v14, 17, 20, 24 and 27)

Right at the start of the study we want to get the big point nice and clear. Living, saving faith will be seen in our actions. It is not enough simply to claim to have faith. You may need to help the group to see that James is not saying that we are saved by works or faith + works. Instead we are saved by faith alone but that saving faith will then be seen in actions.

§2 In the example of v15-16 what will saving faith look like?

Help the group to see that James is specifically focusing on caring for believers. Galatians 6:10 makes it clear that we are to care for everyone but especially fellow believers. Remember that this must not become an opportunity to point the finger at others.

§3 Where do we see believers in need?

Try and help the group to think of our local church, our country and then globally.

§4 How can we help to meet their needs?

Again think about this on different levels. Remind the group that we are not just to talk about this, we, ourselves are to do it, otherwise our faith is dead.

§5 What is the warning from the demons in v19?

They have orthodox theology but that's not enough. You might like to point out that they do at least do something because of their beliefs... they shudder.

§6 How did Abraham and Rahab show their faith? Are there applications for us from these examples?

I would avoid turning up the cross references in the Old Testament because James gives us enough detail in this passage. You might need to help the group see that Abraham is credited with righteousness because of his faith way before the incident with Isaac. His willingness to make such a huge sacrifice for God demonstrated his faith.

Abraham was willing to make huge sacrifices for God and Rahab was willing to take big risks for God's people. We are not in their exact positions but what sacrifices and risks might God be calling us to take as believers? Again don't just talk about other people, apply this to ourselves.

§7 How would you reassure Christians who are worried after reading this passage?

There may be some in your group who are clearly a bit troubled by the end of this. Make sure you have time either in the formal part of the study or afterwards to reassure them where that is appropriate.

§8 How does this passage challenge us if we are complacent Christians? Are we in danger of being complacent?

This brings the study to a close by returning us to the main point James is making. Encourage the group to put into practice what we have been talking about.

James 3

Context

- **Speech in James** - James has a lot to say about what comes out of our mouths. See 1:26, 2:12, 4:2 and 4:11-13. James clearly shows us that our tongues are a major spiritual battle ground. How we speak is a key marker of genuine Christianity. As we saw in ch2 it is not just what we say that matters, it is also how we act and how we speak that shows whether our faith is genuine.
- **Speech in the rest of the Bible** - Jesus helps us see why our speech is such an important battlefield. Remember what he taught us in Matthew 12:33-35 “the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” What comes out of our mouths shows what is in our hearts. James will pick up this same sort of imagery in 3:9-12.
- **Wisdom from heaven and wisdom from earth** - The book of Proverbs has much to say about speech (e.g. Proverbs 10:8,11,21) and it also has lots to say about wisdom. Proverbs shows us that true wisdom comes from above (e.g. Proverbs 2:6) but there are many counterfeit wisdoms that come from the world (e.g. Proverbs 1:8-19.) The world’s ways may seem wise but they prove to be folly. The idea of wisdom from above versus wisdom from below fits with the theme of double-mindedness. We have seen how this is a big theme through the letter (1:8, 4:4 and 4:8.) Throughout his letter James asks, “Will we listen to the world or will we listen to God?” “Who do we want to be friends with?” “Whose wisdom will we live by?”

Structure

3:1-12 Speech

v1 - Teachers and their speech

v2 - Big Point - We all stumble

v3-6 - The power and danger of the tongue

v7-8 - Big Point repeated - We all struggle to tame the tongue

v9-12 - Double-tongued

3:13-18 Wisdom

v13 Big Point - Our wisdom is seen by how we live

v14-16 - Worldly wisdom is seen in envy and ambition

v17-18 - Heavenly wisdom is seen by its peacefulness

Notes

- **v1-2** - This verse might seem to stand on it’s own as a warning to teachers but it also serves to introduce the theme of speech to the rest of the church. Verse 2 begins with the word ‘For/because’ (for some reason the NIV doesn’t translate it but the ESV does.) This means that verse 2 provides the reason for v1. None of us are immune, we all struggle with our tongues and Bible teachers are particularly susceptible because they spend so much time talking.

- **v3-6** - James uses various examples to show how something small can have a big impact. The tongue is no different. It may be tiny, but just like a small spark, it can start a big fire.
- **v7-8** - Having given us various illustrations James returns to the big point he was making in v2 - none of us can tame the tongue on our own. Many of us know this from our own painful experience and our sin grieves us. If that resonates with you then stop your preparation, confess sin that needs confessing, and give thanks that what is impossible for us, is not impossible for God! As the creator of our tongues he can help us by the power of his Holy Spirit to make progress in taming our tongues.
- **v9-12** - In the structure section I called this 'Double-tongued'. What I was trying to get at is the way in which both good and bad comes from our mouths. In that sense we are often not just double-minded, we're double-tongued. We praise God and curse people. As James rightly says this should not be so! Again as scriptures convicts we need to feel it's sting, confess our sins and then turn to Christ again and give thanks that he came to save double-minded, double-tongued sinners like us (4:7-10.)
- **v13-18** - There is something of a break between v1-12 and v13-18. It may be that you choose to just focus on the first section and not spend much if any time on these verses. That is fine as long as we are doing a good job of applying whatever scripture we do study. These verses pick up a clear theme from our studies in chapter 2 - our faith/wisdom is seen in our lives. Worldly wisdom leads to the behaviour of the world (selfish envy and ambition.) In contrast heavenly wisdom leads to the behaviour of heaven (peace and reconciliation which is at the very heart of the gospel.) Notice that despite the break there is something of a link between v1-12 and v13-18. Both are about how we treat and speak to others.

Tricky Bits

- ***In v2 is James really suggesting that we can be perfect?*** No, in the first part of v2 he tells us we all stumble and in v8 he makes it clear that no-one can tame the tongue. The point he is making in v2 is that none of us are perfect.
- ***How is the tongue set on fire by hell?*** In the Bible one of, if not the, biggest of Satan's tools is his words. Think of Genesis 3 and Matthew 4. He is the original deceiver and blasphemer. James uses such evocative image to remind us that our words and tongues are no innocent and harmless. They can do great damage and evil and we need to recognise this. We are in a spiritual battle and our tongues are on the front line.

Big Point - Don't underestimate the power of your tongue and the damage it can do. Look to heaven not earth for the wisdom and help you need to tame it.

Areas of Application

- **Our Speech** - This is the big obvious area of application to focus on but please notice I said, "Our speech." As with much of James it would be very easy to apply this to other people but not ourselves. We can all think of examples of other people's sin and the

damage done by their tongue. Let's make sure we're taking the plank out of our eye (mouth) before we try and help others.

- **Our sin and what we do with it** - It could be very easy to study this passage and finish by comforting ourselves that we all struggle with this so don't beat yourself up about it. If that's where we are heading then re-read v10 - my brothers and sisters this should not be! We must not excuse our sinful speech, nor must we despair and think that there is no hope. We can't tame our tongue (v8) and so the rest of the world can't help (v14-15) but God and his wisdom can help (v17-18.) We need to lean on God and the help and wisdom of his Spirit in our constant battle to tame our tongues.

Questions

Starter -We say “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” but is that really true?

We hear this all the time but it’s simply not the case. We all know from painful experience how damaging our words and the words of others can be. Don’t spend too long on this question otherwise it can become an opportunity to revisit every painful word said to us. This is rarely helpful.

1) James repeatedly tells us that we all struggle to tame our tongues (v2 and v8) so why do you think he starts by focusing on teachers?

If the group is struggling try asking, “What do Bible teachers spend a lot of time doing? What part of their body do they use the most?” This should help people see that the reason James focuses on teachers is because they spend so much time talking.

2) James uses various illustrations in v3-8, what point is he making about our tongues?

This should be nice and straight forward and help all the group get their heads into the passage and say what they see. If you have a large group you could subdivide the group and give different sub groups an illustration each to think about. This could help more people get involved.

3) What do our tongues reveal about our hearts? (v9-12 and v13-18)

You might like to have Matthew 12:33-35 in your back pocket to help the group out. All of James 3:9-18 and Matthew 12:33-35 is about how what comes out of our mouths originates in our hearts. We therefore need heart change if we are to really tame our tongues. Worldly techniques like counting to 10 before we speak may be of some benefit but will not produce real deep lasting change.

4) If we are unable to tame our tongues (v8) then what hope is there?

We mustn’t despair. Nor must we shrug our shoulders and say, “Oh well, we all struggle so it’s not so bad.” James is clear how serious our sin is but there is wonderful hope and help from above. Try and help the group see that the wisdom we need comes from above so we need to rely on God and his Spirit for the help and heart change we need.

5) How do we need to respond to God’s word? Are there specific sins that need confessing and repenting? How can we grow in the wisdom that comes from heaven?

You might like to discuss the second part as a group and think of practical ways you can grow in God’s wisdom. You may then like to give the group some time on their owns or at home to think through personally particular sins where they need to confess, repent and seek God’s help to change.

James 4:1-12

Context

- **Speech** - James has so much to say about how we speak. This passage flows right on from chapter 3 (especially v1-12.) See how our passage is book-ended by focusing on our speech (4:1-3 → 4:11.) Notice too how the next passage continues to focus on our speech (boasting in 4:13-18.)
- **Double-minded Adultery** - This is a big theme through the letter and it is central to this passage (1:8 → 4:8.) The imagery of adultery (4:4) is not original to James. Here he is drawing on the imagery in the book of Hosea to describe unfaithful Israel (Hosea 3:1.) James speaks of spiritual adultery in terms of being friends of the world instead of friends of God (Abraham was commended for being a friend of God - 2:23.) We have also just seen this spiritual adultery expressed as choosing earthly wisdom instead of heavenly wisdom (3:13-17.) This focus on wisdom links to the way James quotes from Proverbs 3:31 in James 4:6. The context of Proverbs is very similar to James. There in Proverbs a father is urging his son to choose the path of God's wisdom rather than the world's "wisdom" (which is really folly.) Through all this James presents us with a very stark black and white choice - we must choose between God or the world and our choice will be seen in our behaviour.
- **Our Hearts** - All this talk of adultery brings us to the root of the problem and the arena of this spiritual battle which is our hearts. Time and again James focuses on the desires of our hearts and says that this is where the problem lies (1:13-15, 3:9-12 and 4:1-3.) God wants the undivided devotion of our hearts (4:5). What is in our hearts will inevitably come out of our mouths in quarrels (4:1-2), selfish prayers (4:3) and slander (3:9 and 4:12) and boasting (3:14 and 4:13.)

Structure

James first poses the question of v1 "What causes fights and quarrels among you?"

He then shows us that the source of the problem is the sinful worldly desires of our hearts and our enmity towards God (v2-6).

Having exposed the source of our sin James then shows us the remedial action that we need to take; first towards God (v7-10) and then towards each other (v11-12).

We can therefore express the structure of the passage as something like this;

v1-6 The Cause of our Fights

v7-12 - The Action that we need to take

Notes

- **“Among you” “one another” (v1 & v11)** - Conflict is everywhere but James is focused specifically on conflict within the church. We have been reconciled to God and to each other through Jesus and yet so often churches are places of conflict and slander. This is the specific focus of these verses.
- **“Your desires that battle within you” (v1)** - We have fights between one another because there’s a fight going on inside of us. We must not fall into the trap of blaming our sin on other people or external influences. James asks, “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” And we instinctively answer, “It’s not my fault, it’s them!” James says, “think again.”
- **“You do not have because you do not ask God.” (v2)** - Here is the first hint of the connection between the desires of our hearts and our relationship with God. Prayer speaks of a healthy dependence upon God. When we do not pray we are expressing our sinful worldly independence from God.
- **“You adulterous people...” (v4)** - James does not begin a new thought in v4. The selfish desires of our hearts (v2-3) are an expression of our spiritual adultery and friendship with the world (v4.)
- **“But he gives us more grace” (v6)** - James has a lot of hard things to say to us in this passage. We need to hear these things. We need to take our sin seriously and see the cause of our quarrels. Yet we must not despair. As we face up to our sin and grieve it we must remember that even though our sins are many and deep, his grace is bigger and deeper still. If you help your group to see nothing else from this passage help them to see how wonderful and deep is God’s grace!
- **“Submit yourselves, then, to God...” (v7)** - We are to submit ourselves to God in every way but it is always worth asking, “What is the specific application in this passage?” The context should guide us from general applications to specific applications. The context of James 4 is our desires. We have seen how if our desires are selfish and worldly then that not only creates conflict with other people (v1) but also with God (v4.) So in v7 we are specifically to submit our desires to God. The Devil would tell us to hold onto our selfish desires, but James calls us to lay aside our selfish desires and instead look to God for godly desires. As our desires fall into line with God’s desires we will increasingly pray for the sorts of things that God wants to give us (v3.)
- **“Come near to God... Humble yourselves before the Lord...” (v7-10)** - Look at all the verbs in these verses. Look at what we are told to do. Turning to God must mean not only grieving our sin but actively turning away from it. We cannot still pursue sin and God. Think of the Prodigal Son. He couldn’t return to his father if he stayed in the pig sty (Luke 15.) We must take our sin seriously (v9) repenting properly and mournfully but we must not lose sight of God’s grace (v6.) It is God’s grace that not only forgives us but empowers us to change.
- **“Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.” (v11-12)** - James finishes the passage where he started - how we speak to/about other Christians. Having been forgiven by God we must then live out that forgiveness and repentance as we speak to one another. To slander each other is to set ourselves up against God (v11-12) as an enemy of God rather than as a forgiven child of God.

Tricky Bits

- ***“You desire but do not have, so you kill.” (v2)*** - That sounds a bit strong doesn't it? We might get angry but we're not murderers, so maybe what James is saying doesn't apply to us. If we're tempted to think like that then we need to remember Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:21-22. We don't need to physically kill someone to be a murderer in God's eyes.
- ***“You do not have because you do not ask.” (v2)*** “So if I ask for something, then whatever it is, God will give it to me?” No, because of v3. Here's a classic case of how we need to read verses in their context.
- ***“Or do you think Scriptures says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?” (v5)*** - This is a tricky verse to translate. The NIV footnote and other versions like the ESV give a slightly different translation. James is either saying; ***“God's Holy Spirit that he has put in us is jealous for us”*** or ***“God is jealous for our spirit.”*** Either way the overall point is the same. God wants us to be fully devoted to him. He does not want us to be adulterous (v4.) Again, the context helps us to understand tricky verses.
- ***The Devil (v7)*** - Mention of the devil can always lead to speculation about him. Remember that the Bible doesn't tell us everything we want to know. Instead, God tells us what we need to know. What we need to know in James 4 is that we are to resist the devil and that if we do that then he will flee from us. So we are not to ignore the devil, he is real and active, but we are also not to cower before him. If we draw near to God and resist the devil then he will flee from us!

Big Idea Our conflicts with each other are symptomatic our our selfish worldly desires and spiritual adultery. So turn back to God in repentance and receive his grace to live at peace with one another.

Applications

- **Take sin seriously** - James will not let us take it lightly. There is more than enough grace for any and every sin so we can be honest before God about our sin.
- **Don't despair at sin and think things are hopeless** - Keep remembering that he gives us more grace. Remember too the power of God that as we resist sin and the devil, he will flee from us.
- **Take repentance seriously** - Repentance is more than sorrow, it involves real action and change.
- **Show our grace-powered repentance in how you speak to the rest of the church** - Again our forgiveness from God and friendship with God will be seen in the gracious, peaceful way that we speak to one another.

Questions

Starter Question - Think of a recent conflict or quarrel that you had with someone. Who or what did you instinctively blame?

Although the specific context is quarrels between Christians you could broaden it out and think about arguments in a marriage, a friendship or at work.

1) How do v1-3 help us to understand the real source of conflict? (v1-3)

They show us our hearts. Just like in chapter 3, what comes out of our mouths, either in prayer or a quarrel, reflects the desires of our hearts. The problem is not first and foremost external, it's internal.

2) What do our conflicts and desires show about our hearts and our relationship with God? (v4-5, 11-12)

This flows on from the previous question. When we fight with each other it is not just our relationship with that person that is a mess, our relationship with God is also not as it should be.

3) What does James teach us about sin and repentance? (v6-10.) How does our approach to sin and repentance compare?

James takes sin and repentance very seriously and we are to do the same. Remember that there will be some in your group with very tender consciences who need to hear the reassurances of the passage (see the next question.) At the same time there will be others who need to take their sin and repentance more seriously. Repentance is more than sorrow, it involves action.

4) How will v6, v7 and v10 help you next time you are confronted with your own sin and selfish desires?

It's good to finish on the encouragements and grace in the passage. This is particularly important for those who are feeling overwhelmed either with temptation or guilt. Perhaps they feel trapped in a cycle of arguments and fights in their marriage. Perhaps they struggle to control their tongue. Seeing the grace, power and help of God as we fight to be devoted to him is the encouragement we need.

James 4:13-5:6

Context

- **Double-mindedness** - Throughout the letter we have seen the ways we are torn between being friends with the world and friends with God (4:4). In this passage we see a worldly attitude to our time (4:13) and a worldly attitude to wealth (5:1-6.) These are two areas where we can so easily adopt a worldly attitude and so it is not surprising that this passage contains some of James' strongest language.
- **Our times are in God's hands** - Everything that we have is a gift from God (James 1:17) and this includes our time (4:14-15.) There are big parallels between what James teaches in 4:13-17 and the message of the book of Ecclesiastes that we have been studying on Sunday mornings (e.g. Ecclesiastes 3.)
- **We are frail and temporary** - We have seen this already in James 1:11 and James now returns to this theme (4:14.) This is a theme found throughout the Bible (e.g. 1 Peter 1:24-25 and Ecclesiastes.)
- **Earthly riches will not last either** - In 5:1-6 James is echoing the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:19-24.
- **Rich and Poor in James** - There was clearly a major tension between rich and poor. James repeatedly applies his teaching to this tension (e.g. 1:9-11, 1:27, 2:5-7, 2:15-17.) On top of this we have seen the theme of self-indulgence in the previous passage (4:1-3.)
- **God's Judgment** - The final day of judgment is something that James keeps returning to as a reminder and motivation for not being friends with the world. Sometimes he uses it as a positive encouragement (e.g. 1:12), other times he uses it as a warning (e.g. 2:12-13, 3:1 and 4:11-12.)

Structure

- The passage falls naturally into two sections; 4:13-17 and 5:1-6.
 - Each section begins by James addressing a particular group of people, "Now, listen you..." (4:13 & 5:1.)
 - Each section is linked by the theme of transience. In 4:13-17 we are reminded that we are transient like mist (4:14). In 5:1-6 we are reminded that our wealth and material possessions rot and corrode (5:2-3.)

Notes

- **4:13-14** - We are forever making plans. We fill up our calendars and diaries as if we are in control of time and the future but we are not. We cannot control the future. Our times are not in our hands. We forget that we are mortal. We plan as if we are immortal and in control of the future when we are not.
- **v15** - How we make our plans and live our lives needs to be shaped by a right view of who we are (mortal) and who God is (immortal.) As we have this proper perspective we come to recognise that all our times are in God's hands (Psalm 31:15). We begin to see time not as something we can control but as a gift from God for us to use humble and

wisely. This is not just about saying, “God willing” all the time. It is about the whole attitude of our hearts. It is about a reordering of our plans so that God is central not us. Notice how in v14 the focus is on what “**we**” will do, whereas in v15 the focus is on God wills.

- **4:16-17** - When our desires are central to our plans then this is sinful. We are refusing to give God his rightful place in our lives. We are trying to live independently of him as if our times were in our hands not his.
- **5:1-3, 5** - The focus here is on the hoarding of the rich. It speaks forcefully to our society where accumulating wealth and possessions is celebrated. James shows us not only how futile this is but also how sinful it is. Linked to this hoarding is the selfish indulgence of the rich(v5.) Instead of using what they have to help others, the rich have simply used it for themselves. This sinful behaviour is in sharp contrast to passages such as 1 Timothy 6:17-19 where the rich are told to be generous and rich in good deeds so that they will lay up for themselves eternal treasure.
- **5:4-6** - Not only have the rich failed to help the poor they have also exploited them. Throughout the scriptures God condemns the exploitation of the poor (e.g. Amos 5). Whatever material possessions we enjoy have been given to us by God so that we might use them to help and serve others. When we simply hoard material possessions for ourselves we’re living in defiance of God/

Tricky Bits

- **“Is it wrong to make plans?”** Should we live from one day to the next without ever thinking about or preparing for tomorrow? Is James saying that it is sinful to make any plans for the future? No, James is not saying it is wrong to plan. He is saying that as we plan we need to do so humbly, recognising that our times are not in our hands. God is in control, not us, and this needs to be reflected in how we make our plans. God and his word and his will must be central to our plans.
- **“Is it wrong to make money?”** Is that what James is criticising in 4:13? Again, no. James is not against business and money. What James is against is selfish planning that puts our desires rather than God’s will at the centre.
- **“Are the rich people in 5:1 Christians?”** This is an important question. Are James’ strong words in 5:1-6 aimed at rich Christians in the church or rich people outside the church? I think these verses are addressed to rich people outside the church. Throughout the letter James has often shown he is addressing Christians by using phrases like “my fellow believers” (2:1, 3:1) or “my brothers and sisters” (1:2, 1:16, 1:19, 2:1, 2:5, 2:14, 4:11) Yet here at the start of chapter 5 there is no such reference. There is also no call to repentance in 5:1-6. This is in contrast to the rest of the letter where he points out the sin of believers and then shows them what repentance will look like. We have just seen a classic example of this in 4:13-17. I therefore think that James is condemning the rich in society. By doing this he is warning believers not to envy the rich. James wants believers to see the danger of those who live for riches. As he addresses rich unbelievers in 5:1-6 he is setting up the application to Christians which comes in 5:7 (notice the word ‘then’ which links 5:7 with 5:1-6.) Judgment will come on the rich who are oppressing poor Christian believers (5:1-6 and 2:6-7) so Christians are to be patient and wait for vindication when Jesus comes.

- ***“Is it wrong for Christians to have savings and pensions?”*** Aren't we hoarding wealth as we save for the future? Isn't that what James condemns in 5:2-3? Again, I do not think that James is saying that it is sinful to save money. Making plans and provisions for the future is not necessarily sinful. The issue is our hearts. Are we making plans and saving for the future putting our confidence in our material possessions or are we doing so trusting God and seeking to honour him?

Big Idea - We and all our stuff will pass away but God is eternal so make plans and use what you have accordingly.

Applications

- ***Face up to your own mortality and recognise that God is immortal*** - We don't like to think about death but we need to humbly acknowledge that we are a mist. Until we acknowledge this we will be sinfully making our plans. Only when we confess that God is immortal will we begin to put him central to our plans and priorities.
- ***Stop living as if you can control the future. Humbly confess that all your times are in God's hands*** - It is humbling and counter-cultural to confess that we are not in control. It is scary to think that the future isn't ours to control but there is also great comfort when we realise that all our times are in God's hands. As we do this we then need to let God shape and control our plans and priorities.
- ***Stop selfishly hoarding wealth like everyone else*** - We are so easily swept along by the rest of society in desperately trying to accumulate more and more. James brings a cutting perspective on our wealth showing us how it is just as temporary as we are. 5:1-6 also raises the issue of exploitation. Most of us are not farm owners refusing to pay workers their wages but there are many ways that the poor are exploited today. What about the food we eat and the clothes? Have the people involved in producing these things received a fair price? Are we so concerned about our luxury that we turn a blind eye to injustice?

Questions

Starter - We all make plans and provisions for the future. What sort of things often influence our plans?

We are not necessarily looking for the right answer. We are looking for the honest answer. We know that God should shape our plans but so often God is not central to our plans. What sort of things muscle in and become key to our plans?

4:13-17

1) What is so wrong with the attitude in v13?

James gives us the answer in the following verse. Help the group to see James is not opposed to us making plans (v15.) The issue is that we easily have too high a view of ourselves and refuse to acknowledge that our times are in God's hands not our hands.

2) According to James, how should we make our plans?

God must be central. We need to humbly let God's will revealed in his word change and shape our plans.

3) Why is it good news that our times are in God's hands?

Many of us are very anxious and worried about the future. We are desperately trying to control the future but we can't. It is a wonderful reassurance to find that though our times aren't in our hands they are safe in God's hands.

4) What sort of good things can easily get squeezed out?

Think about the sorts of things that God says are important. In the busyness of day to day life things like prayer and reading the Bible can so easily get squeezed out.

5:1-6

5) As a society we are obsessed with getting more and more. Why do you think this is?

People might have all sorts of different and valid ideas for why this is. You might want to ask the group what our focus on wealth says about what we believe?

6) What has James got to say about accumulating wealth?

These are some of James' sharpest and strongest words in his letter. They need to be so sharp to cut through the lies that we tell ourselves about wealth and material possessions. We need to be reminded that our possessions like ourselves are fleeting and temporary.

7) Compared to many people around the world we enjoy a life of luxury. Can you think of ways in which our lifestyles bring misery to others?

This is quite a controversial topic and could lead to quite a big debate about ethical trading etc. This is an important area that we need to think about but we must do it honestly, examining ourselves rather than pointing the finger at others.

8) How will these verses change the way we save and spend our money?

As always with James we need to be doers not just hearers of the word. Encourage the group to come up with concrete practical changes not just vague ideas.

James 5:7-12

Context

- ***Oppression, exploitation and injustice*** - The key to understanding the context of this passage is the little word, 'then' in v7. "Be patient, then, brothers and sisters..." This means that the patience James is calling for is linked to what has gone before in 5:1-6. Those verses described the oppression of poor farm labourers by the rich. There was a similar theme in 2:6-7 where James said that Christians were being exploited by the rich. James is therefore calling on Christians to be patient when they experience injustice.
- ***Patience and Perseverance in Trials*** - As James comes to the end of his letter he returns to one of the big themes from the beginning of the book. In 1:2-4 he urged us to persevere in trials of many kinds because God uses trials to make us mature and complete. Now in chapter 5 he again urges us to be patient and stand firm in the face of injustice (v7), suffering (v10) and illness and disaster (v11.) A true mark of genuine faith is that it perseveres.
- ***God hears the cries of the suffering and will act in judgment*** - The theme of God's judgment was there in 5:1, 5:3, 5:4, 5:5 and continues now in 5:7, 5:8, 5:9 and 5:12. The Lord hears the cries of the oppressed (5:4) and he will act in judgment to put right all injustice. This is an encouragement to persevere when facing injustice but also to stand firm and keep a tight reign on our tongue. (see 5:9 and 5:12.)
- ***The importance of our speech*** - We have repeatedly seen how important our speech is (e.g. 3:1-12, 4:1 and 4:11-12.) Again James tells us that how we speak really does matter (5:9 and 5:12.) As James addresses the issue of swearing oaths his words are very reminiscent of Jesus' in Matthew 5:34-37.
- ***Job and the Prophets*** - James holds up Job and the Prophets as examples to us of those who persevered through suffering, persecution and trials. Consider prophets like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:1-13) or Amos (7:10-13). Similarly Job's entire story is one of perseverance through incredible suffering (e.g. Job 1:21, 2:9-10, 16:19-21.) In particular notice how Job was commended by God for the way he spoke through his trials (42:7). Jesus also uses the persecution of the prophets as an example to his disciples (Matthew 5:11-12.)

Structure

- In this short section the theme of patiently waiting for the Lord's coming holds the section together. Within this James uses several examples of patience and shows us two examples of what patient speech looks like;

Big Point - Be Patient until the Lord's coming (v7a)

Example of the Patient Farmer (v7b)

Big Point - Be Patient because the Lord's coming is near (v8)

Application of Patient Speech - Don't grumble because the Judge is near (v9)

Example of the Patient Prophets (v10)

Example of Patient Job (v11)

Application of Patient Speech - Don't swear (v12)

Notes

- ***"Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming." (v7)*** - As already mentioned it's important to see the link with the injustice of 5:1-6. Instead of getting angry or trying to take revenge, believers are to respond to injustice with patience. Notice, that we are not told to show endless patience. Instead we are to be patient until the Lord's coming. The secret to being patient rather than retaliating comes from being clear that the Lord is coming. That's why James comes back to it again in v8 and v9.
- ***"The Farmer waits..." (v7)*** - The analogy is not simply a secular example of patience. Remember who sends the rains? The Lord! As the Farmer waits for rain he is trusting God to faithfully provide. Similarly we are to faithfully wait for the Lord to provide justice for the oppressed.
- ***"Stand Firm" (v8)*** - It might be easy to miss those two little words but they help us to understand what it means to be patient until the Lord's coming. We are not to be passive and inactive. Instead we are to make a real effort to stand firm. What are we to stand firm in? In the context of the whole letter we are to stand firm resisting the temptation to be double-minded. We are to stand firm in living out our friendship with God. In the specific context of these verses we are to stand firm in our speech (v9 and v12.)
- ***"Take the prophets..." (v10-12)*** - In using the example of Job and the Prophets James is reminding us that injustice, suffering and persecution are nothing new for God's people. When we are experiencing such trials we can easily think that what is happening to us is unique, but it is not. There is reassurance to know that others before us have suffered as we are now suffering. They persevered and so there is hope for us too to persevere and stand firm for God. The ultimate example of perseverance is Jesus and Hebrews urges us to fix our eyes on him as we suffer (Hebrews 12:1-3.)

- **“Above all... do not swear” (v12)** - This might seem a strange climax to a section about patience and waiting for the Lord’s coming, but remember what we saw in the structure. As so often in his letter James is showing us how his big point applies to our speech. When we are under pressure due to injustice, suffering or persecution it is very easy to take it out on one another (v9). It is also easy to make rash promises and exaggerated language when we are under pressure. Instead we are to make calm and simple promises rather than going overboard with unnecessary oaths.

Tricky Bits

- **“How does grumbling and swearing oaths relate to being patient and standing firm?”** When we are feeling under pressure that can easily have a negative effect on our speech. If other people are making life difficult for us we can so easily turn on one another. Similarly when feeling under pressure we can easily speak rashly making unnecessary promises.
- **“Was James wrong to say the Lord’s coming was near?”** If James believed that Jesus would return in the first century then clearly he was wrong. If James was wrong about Jesus’ return then can we disregard the rest of his teaching? I don’t think James believed that Jesus was definitely going to return in the first century. When he says “the Lord’s coming is near” he is not necessarily saying that the Lord’s coming is imminent. Instead he uses ‘near’ in the sense of there is nothing else to happen before the Lord’s coming. On God’s calendar, ever since Pentecost, Jesus’ return has been the next thing to happen. Jesus could return any day.
- **“Why does James say that Christians will be judged and condemned?”** 3x James makes it clear that he is addressing Christians (v7, v10 and v12) so in what sense will Christians be judged? Surely Jesus was judged for us? James can’t mean that our standing before God is under threat because our standing before God rests on Jesus not us. James is saying that Jesus is clearly displeased by our grumbling and excessive oath-swearing. Exactly how Jesus disciplines us is not spelt out here.

Big Idea - Wait patiently for Jesus with patient speech

Applications

- **Wait Patiently for Jesus** - Here’s the big application. Within your group there will be all sorts of trials. Some will experience injustice of one form or another, others will experience sickness, suffering, persecution or loss. In all these we’re called to wait patiently for Jesus to come and put things right. We will only have the strength to wait if we continue to remember that Jesus is coming.
- **Speak as those who remember that Jesus is at the door** - Our patient waiting for Jesus will be heard in how we speak. Grumbling against other Christians and rashly making promises are signs that we are not waiting patiently.
- **Remember and follow the example of those who endured trials** - God is not calling us to do something new. The Bible is full of examples of others who have waited patiently for God. The supreme example is Jesus. The more we get to know the characters of the Bible the more it helps us to put our own trials in perspective. It also helps us to wait patiently as they did.

Questions

Starter Question - Think of a time when you had to wait patiently. What were you waiting for? What helped you to wait?

We don't find waiting easy but often by focusing on whatever it is we're waiting for (e.g. presents on Christmas Day) helps us to wait. There is a similar pattern in the passage. Waiting is hard but we are to remember that Jesus is coming!

§1 What was happening to some of the Christians? (2:6-7 and 5:4-6) How do you think they were tempted to respond to such injustice?

They were poor Christians who were being exploited and badly treated by rich land owners. You could imagine all sorts of different ways they might be tempted to respond and seek revenge or retribution. They might easily get angry. That might be directed against those who were ill-treating them but it could also be directed at other believers (v9.)

§2 In what ways can we experience injustice?

Very few if any of us will be farm labourers but the work place can often be a place where we experience various forms of injustice. There can be all sorts of ways in which we feel that we have not been treated fairly and we can be tempted to respond in all sorts of impatient and sinful ways.

§3 What do you think it means to be patient and stand firm? In what ways might we respond impatiently?

Building on the last question we really want to drill down into the big application of the passage. Sometimes considering the negative application can help us to think about the positive application. So getting angry and seeking revenge might be examples of responding impatiently. In contrast calmly trusting God to bring about justice in his time and therefore remaining calm, gracious and peace-loving (see 3:17-18) might be examples of patiently standing firm. It might be that someone gives a real example of a way in which they have experienced injustice. You could sensitively use that example to help the group think through what it will practically mean to stand firm.

§4 James tells us 'the Lord's coming is near' and 'the Judge is standing at the door.' How will this shape the way we speak and act in trials?

The coming of Jesus in justice is a comfort to us when we suffer but also a warning to us to be very careful about how we speak and act. When someone sins against us it is no excuse to respond sinfully. Remembering that Jesus is coming as a just judge helps us to respond in holiness.

§5 Think about Job. What trials did he face? How did he show perseverance?

Depending on your group you may want to turn up some verses from Job to help them. Other groups may be very familiar with Job and be able to answer the questions without looking up cross-references.

§6 How can Job be an encouraging example to you in your life?

Try and use this question to tie together some of the threads from this study. In many ways there is no right or wrong answer here. We are simply inviting people to apply scripture to their own circumstances. You could do this as one whole group or in smaller sub-groups.

James 5:13-20

Context

- **Double-minded and friendship with the world** - This has been a big theme throughout the letter (1:8 and 4:4.) James has been showing us the danger of trying to hedge our bets. This theme continues here in this final passage. The issue of sin runs through the passage (v15, v16, v19 and v20.) The double-minded Christian is one who is spiritually adulterous and is wandering away from the truth and therefore is in great danger. In many ways 5:19-20 sum up much of what James has been saying in the letter.
- **Prayer** - One of the marks of someone who is a devoted friend of God is that they pray to God in any and every situation (4:13-16; 1:5, 4:2-3, 4:7-10.) The double-minded person looks to the world as well as to God for wisdom and help.
- **Suffering and Sin** - The link between suffering and sin is probably the trickiest part of this passage. (See below for more details.) For now it is important to recognise what the rest of the Bible says about the relationship between the two.
 - 1st - As a result of the fall (Genesis 3) sickness and suffering are part of the human experience of living in this broken world. Christians are not immune from this.
 - 2nd - Not all suffering is the direct result of specific sin. Jesus makes this clear in (John 9:1-3.) Most of the time sickness and suffering are simply a consequence of living in this world that is subject to frustration (Romans 8:18-22.)
 - 3rd - There are some instances where a particular case of suffering is the result of specific sin (John 5:14, 1 Corinthians 11:27-30.) There are times when there is a connection between sickness and sin though we must be very careful about identifying such a connection.
- **Elijah** - James uses the prophet Elijah as an example of a righteous man whose prayers were powerful and effective. The particular events James has in mind come in 1 Kings 17-18. This was a time of great spiritual adultery in Israel. Straight away we can begin to see parallels with what James has been talking about in his letter. God had warned his people in Deuteronomy 28:15, 23-24 that if they turned away from him then he would discipline them by withholding the rain. This helps us to see that Elijah's prayers weren't random. His prayers were powerful and effective because he was praying in line with God's will! God withheld rain as discipline so that his people who were wandering away from the truth might be saved from the error of their ways. The example of Elijah therefore fits well with the big theme of James at the climax of the letter.

Structure

- The themes of prayer, confession and repenting of sin run throughout this letter. As he often does, James makes his point telling us what to do (look how many times we're told to pray in v13-16) and then backs it up with an example (v17-18) before showing us why turning one another from sin is so important (v19-20.)

Notes

- **v13-14 - *Whatever is happening we should pray.*** Whether happy, troubled or ill we should always pray. Those who are friends of God will talk to him about everything. Friends of the world either ignore God completely or only talk to him at certain times (e.g. trouble) but ignore him the rest of the time.
- **v14 - *“Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord”*** - There’s lots we can say about this verse.
 - Firstly, notice that this is talking about Christians who are ill (*“is anyone among you ill?”*)
 - Secondly James is not describing a healing service or rally. The ill person calls the elders to them in their home.
 - Thirdly notice too that the initiative doesn’t come from the elders “come and be prayed for”, but rather from the sick believer “please come and pray for me.”
 - Fourthly the use of oil speaks of somebody who is fully devoted to God. They are repenting of their sin, and seeking to be completely dependent upon God.
 - We will say more about this in the tricky bits below.
- **v15 *“the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well/saved”*** - The word that the NIV translates as well can also be translated ‘save’ So for example the ESV translates v15 as, *“And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”* This might seem confusing but it helps us see that James is talking about times when there is a specific link between sickness and sin.
- **v16 - *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”*** It is not just the Elders who we are to confess our sins to and seek prayer from. We are also to confess to and pray for each other. Here is one of the many examples of ‘one another’ ministry that is to take place among us. Confession and repentance are not private. We all need one another and we all have a responsibility to one another.
- **v16 - *“The prayers of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”*** - The gospel reminds us that as believers in the Jesus we are declared righteous, not because of our own merits but freely because of his grace. As we live out that righteousness and pray in line with God’s will then our prayers can be powerful and effective. This is exactly what James demonstrates with the example of Elijah. As a righteous man his prayers were aligned with God’s will and therefore God answered them.
- **v19-20 - *These verses are not separate to the rest of the passage.*** This whole passage is about sinners turning back to God (v15-16 and Israel in v17-18.) Just as we are to be involved in one another’s lives in confession and prayer (v16) so we are also to be involved in one another’s lives to such an extent that we will lovingly warn each other when we are going astray. If we are British then this might sound very intrusive, but when we see how dangerous it is to walk away from God (v20) then it is the only loving thing we can do.

Tricky Bits

• **The connection between sin and sickness**

- James does seem to be talking about a link between sin and sickness in this passage. We have already seen that v15 could be translated “*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick...*” Notice too that in v16 he tells us to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other so that we may be healed. It seems like James has got things muddled up; the sick person is saved and the sinner is healed. We would normally expect him to say that the sinner will be saved and the sick person made well. But James is drawing a connection between this person’s sin and their sickness.
- We must be very careful and cautious about making such a link between sin and sickness. But as we saw in the context there are some instances when scripture does make a link between the two (see context for examples.) In such cases suffering is a form of discipline from God because of sin. That was the case for Israel in Elijah’s day where the suffering due to a lack of rain was God’s discipline. It was also the case in Corinth. In such situations the suffering is meant to lead to repentance.

“This makes sense of James’ instructions. In the context of enormous, collective double-mindedness among God’s people, James urges the sick to call for the elders precisely because this may (may, not must) be a matter of spiritual discipline, where Christian leadership is required. The elders are to pray for health to be restored for the repentant sinner. If the sickness is indeed the Lord’s discipline, it will be lifted; the sick person will be made well (James 5:15)—both in body and spirit.” Sam Allberry

- Times of sickness and suffering should therefore be times of self-examination. Our sickness will not always be due to a specific sin but it might be. We are therefore to examine ourselves, confess our sins and turn afresh to God in repentance and faith. In saying this we must re-emphasise that there will not always be a connection.
- **“Should we have healing services based on James 5?”**
 - James is not talking about special meetings or healing services. From the way that the sick person calls the Elders to come to them it seems to take place privately in their home.
 - It is worth noticing too that the people who are called are not special gifted healers but rather the normal Elders of the church.
 - Notice again that this is not for everyone but only for those who are believers in the church (“Is any of you...”) These believers are to ask their Elders/overseers/shepherds to come and pray for them.
- **“And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well...” So if I wasn’t healed was it because of my lack of faith?**
 - James cannot be saying that believing prayer will always result in healing because this does not fit with the message of the rest of scripture (2 Corinthians 12:7-10.)
 - We must also remember that the key to faith is not how much of it we have but who our faith is in. The strength of our faith comes not from our intensity but from who Jesus is. It would be wrong to suggest that only people with a certain amount of faith receive healing.

Big Idea Wandering away from God in sin is really dangerous so we need to pray and look out for one another!

Applications

- **Pray all sorts of prayer in all sorts of situations!** v13-14 should make us stop and examine our own prayer lives. Look back at what you have prayed for recently? Do you often end up praying for the same sort of things? Do you pray a variety of prayers? Are they a mix of thanksgiving and requests? Do you only pray to God when times are going badly but forget him when life is well? Or do you only when things are going well but turn your back on him when life is hard?
- **Be very careful about drawing a direct link between a particular sin and suffering**
We must read this passage in light of the whole of scripture. Most of the time suffering comes simply as a result of living in a fallen world rather than because of a particular sin that someone has committed. People can be left feeling crushed and guilty if they are told that their suffering is their fault.
- **Carefully examine ourselves** - Whilst we should not always assume that sickness is caused by specific sin, we should not completely discount the possibility. We should therefore carefully examine ourselves (not other people.) We should regularly examine our own hearts and lives and confess our sins.
- **We are in this together** - Reading this passage we cannot avoid the implication that we are to be involved in one another's lives. We are to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other (v16). We are to know each other well enough that we can see when someone is wandering off and we are to do what we can to bring them back (v19-20.) If we are tempted to think that I can be a Christian on my own without the rest of my church family then this passage blows that idea out of the water. We will not have these intimate relationships with everyone in the church but we should have this sort of close relationship with at least one or two people. Are there people who you can be truly honest with? Are there people who are able to challenge you when you are going astray? Are you the sort of person that people can open up to and confess their sins to? Is your Home Group the sort of group where these sorts of close relationships are being developed? If not then what could you do differently to encourage this sort of openness?

Questions

Starter - What sort of things do you normally pray about? Are you more likely to pray when life's going well or when life's tough?

You could ask people to reflect on their own prayers or you could talk about the things that you pray for as a group. Do you only pray for those in trouble? Or do you also rejoice and praise God for good things?

1) In v13 James says that whatever is happening its always right to pray. How can we cultivate that sort of prayer life?

Here's an opportunity for different people in the group to share what has helped them. Maybe keeping a prayer journal could help, this would help us to see when God has answered prayers so that we can then give thanks. Alternatively using the prayers of scripture can help us have a more varied diet of prayer.

A prayer life where, whatever the situation, we instinctively turn to prayer reflects a growing friendship with God. When we're double-minded and friends with the world we will not instinctively turn to God.

2) v14-16 are difficult verses. What link does James seem to be making between this person's sickness and their sin? Can you think of other parts of the Bible that help us understand the relationship between the two?

James is not saying that every sickness is the result of a specific sin (see John 9:1-3. Sickness is part of living in a fallen world (Genesis 3 and Romans 8.) Sometimes like here, the Bible does draw a link between sickness and specific sin. Sometimes God uses sickness and suffering to discipline his people (1 Corinthians 11:27-30.)

You might find it helpful to remind the group that the big issue James is addressing in the letter and the passage is spiritual adultery (double-mindedness).

These verses could lead to all sorts of questions from the group about when it is or is not appropriate to ask the Elders to pray. Others may want to talk about healing services (see the tricky bits above). Others may have questions about 'the prayer offered in faith'. As the group leader you will need to carefully but also firmly steer your group through this discussion recognising that different people will have different opinions.

3) What are we to do in v16?

a) We may not feel able to be this open with everyone but do we have at least one or two people in church who we can be this honest with?

b) How can we develop these sorts of friendships?

These verses challenge those of us who like to think that we can live the Christian life alone. We need each other. This is just one of many 'one-another' passages in the New Testament. Instead of bemoaning ways in which everybody else is defensive and private, turn it around and think about the practical steps we can take to cultivate these friendships and be the sorts of people who others will feel comfortable sharing with.

- 4) **James now uses Elijah as an example of how the prayers of a righteous person are effective. What did Elijah pray for?**
- a) **Look at Deuteronomy 28:15, 22-24. What was God's warning to Israel?**
 - b) **Now look at 1 Kings 18:21. What was the problem in Elijah's day?**
 - c) **Why did God answer Elijah's prayer?**
 - d) **How does this encourage us to pray?**

To really get the significance of Elijah's prayer we need to do a bit of digging in the Old Testament. If time is running short then it might be best to move on to the final questions and focus on application.

In Deuteronomy 28 we see God warning his people that if they are disobedient then he will discipline them with drought.

Then in 1 Kings 18 we see that in Elijah's day God's people are being double-minded and disobedient. This has strong echoes with James' letter. This helps us to see that when Elijah prays for the rain to stop it is not a random prayer. He knows what God has said and so he is praying in line with God's will! This is really important for the group to grasp. The prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective because the righteous are in tune with God's word and his will. The righteous pray for the sorts of things that God has said he will do. This should encourage us to align our prayers with God's will and pray for the sorts of things that God has said he give us.

5. v19 sounds very unbritish but why is wandering away from the truth so serious?
This sounds like interfering but v20 reminds us that double-mindedness is spiritually deadly!

6. If you were going astray, how would you want someone to bring you back?
Before we think about turning other people from the error of their ways it is good to start with ourselves. As we think about the way that we would want to be spoken to it will then help us to think about the right way to speak to others.

7. Can you see somebody who is wandering away from the truth? What can you do to try and bring them back?
Perhaps there is someone who used to come to your group who no longer comes (either to the group or to church.) Maybe there was someone who used to sit near your on a Sunday who has stopped coming. What first step could you take this week to help them come back?

It might be good to finish by reminding the group of the parable of the lost sheep or Luke 19:10 "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." These remind us how the way that God graciously sought us when we were lost and going astray. Will we show that same concern for those who are dangerously wandering away?