



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Week 1: Introduction to James

Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read through the whole Epistle of James. It will only take 20 minutes or so, and will help give you a broader context for the series.

1. What are your general impressions from reading the Epistle of James as a whole? What did you find most inspiring or troubling? Were there any parts that seemed hard to understand?
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
3. Read James 1:1 and discuss the following:
 - If the author is James the brother of Jesus or a very close associate, how might this influence how you read the letter?
 - Read John 7:1-6, Galatians 2:9-10 and Acts 15:12-21. What do these descriptions tell us about James (Jesus' brother)? How might this influence how you read the letter?
 - What do you think the author means by "The Twelve Tribes of Israel" in James 1:1? To whom are they writing?
4. Read James 1:2-5. What kind of "trials" did you notice from your reading of the Epistle as a whole? In what way do you relate to such trials and the author's conviction that they help bring about maturity?
5. Read James 5:1-6. Why do you think the author is adopting the language of the ancient Hebrew prophets? How do you think the author's various audiences would have reacted to this? How do you react?
6. Compare the following passages in the first chapter of James with Jesus' sayings in the Sermon on the Mount:
 - James 1:2 and Matthew 5:10-12
 - James 1:10-11 and Matthew 6:28-30
 - James 1:17 and Matthew 7:11
 - James 1:20 and Matthew 5:22
 - James 1:22 and Matthew 7:24-27Why do you think the author uses so many references to this part of Jesus' teaching?
7. Some have argued that James contradicts Paul's theology about things like "grace", "justification" and "works." Read Romans 3:28, Galatians 2:15-16 and Ephesians 2:8-10. What kind of "works" is Paul talking about? Read James 2:14-17. What kind of "works" is James talking about? How does "faith" differ here for Paul and James? How is it the same?
8. Read James 5:16. If you are discussing these questions as a group break up into smaller groups of 2 or 3 to share current struggles and needs. After sharing, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly open your heart to God and allow people you know to be in need to come to mind. Take a few moments to "hold them in the Light."

Practice for the week: "Wisdom from Above"

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 (NIV)

Take a few moments at the beginning of each day to center yourself, quiet your heart, and read the above scripture from James. Read it several times and consciously open your heart and mind to God's love and light. Invite the Spirit of Wisdom to envelop and fill you. Carry this presence with you into your day, and be conscious of it in your interactions, decisions and thinking.

Week 2: Pure Love and Perfect Law (James 1:1-27)

Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read through the whole first chapter of James.

1. What are your general impressions from reading the first chapter as a whole? What did you find most inspiring or troubling? Were there any parts that seemed hard to understand?
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
3. Read James 1:2-8 and discuss the following:
 - Can you describe a time when you've experienced hardship and suffering in a way that was positively transformative for you? What were some of the positive outcomes? How did you grow as a person because of these circumstances and why?
 - Can you describe a time when you've experienced circumstances beyond your control and felt "blown and tossed by the wind" of life in a negative way? What were some of the outcomes?
 - For each of these experiences were there any differences in the way you received and responded to the circumstances? How does what the author of James shares here relate to this? Is there anything here that could help you now, or in the future?
4. Read James 1:9-12. Then read Isaiah 40:6-8 and Psalm 37:1-11, which contain similar themes and may have influenced the author. What is similar about all three of these passages and how do they differ? Do you think the other two passages apply appropriately to what the author of James is saying? What are your own opinions about wealth, power, and control? Are they as fleeting as the author suggests? Do you identify most here as one who is rich or as one in "humble circumstances" and why?
5. Read James 1:13-18. Take some time for silent reflection (write your thoughts down privately if it helps). What are some ways in which you give in to temptation habitually? This might be certain behaviors and actions, or it could be habitual ways of thinking (about yourself or others). It could be habitual emotions and responses to certain situations or people. Think about ways in which you seem to get hijacked or "dragged away," as the author of James puts it. Don't share anything verbally at this point but hold these reflections personally.
6. Read James 1:19-25. What is the connection here between the two examples of looking in a mirror and looking into "the perfect law that gives freedom"? What does the author mean? Now read Matthew 5:1-20. How might this help us understand what the author of James is saying?
7. If you are discussing these questions as a group, break up into smaller groups of 2 or 3. Take some time to discuss any reflections from question 5 above that you feel comfortable sharing. How might the discussion from question 6 above help you with the challenges you share? After sharing, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly open your heart to God and invite God's wisdom and love to transform you.

Practice for the week: Sacred Reading of Scripture – James 1:1-27

This is a way of praying with scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus and is often called *Lectio Divina*, which is Latin for sacred or divine reading. A regular practice of *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply to scripture and allow God's presence to open our lives. It helps us listen for the still small voice of God speaking to us personally here and now, and to grow in awareness of God's presence with us, in us and around us. We interact with the text of scripture but unlike Bible study we do not analyze or dissect it. We listen in quiet and allow the words to settle into us as we quiet our thinking to receive them deeply into our hearts.

There are many ways to engage with *Lectio Divina*, but four steps are commonly used: read, meditate, respond, and rest. (If you prefer to listen to the Scripture rather than read it, there are some great apps and websites for that such as www.biblegateway.com.)

Read: Read the passage of scripture. This is best done slowly and intentionally with an awareness of God's presence speaking through the text. Simply listen for God's voice in this moment. Don't search or seek out the meaning on your own, but rather wait, and listen for something to emerge. When a word or phrase seems to settle on you, take it in and just sit with it in the silence.

Meditate: Read the text again for the purpose of "hearing" or "seeing" God in it. This is a deep searching of the heart. Ponder it, reflect on it, ask how this is applicable to your own experience, your own life? How is God reaching you right now, speaking to you in the word or phrase?

Respond: The third reading is for the purpose of responding back to God, expressing honestly whatever is happening in your heart and spirit as a result of listening. There may be joy, tears, awe, reverence, even confusion - give any emotion or thought that arises freely to God at this time. And listen for how God might want you to turn, move or act because of what you've heard.

Rest: Finally, let your mind and emotions settle to rest in silence and simply seek to love and be loved by God. Anytime distracting thoughts arise, just return to the word that stood out in the reading, and repeat it, and allow other thoughts to fade. Allow this "sacred word" to symbolize all your love for God, and your willingness to give God all your attention. Sit in the presence of God and use the word as a window through which to gaze upon God and to allow the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.

Week 3: Practical Faith (James 2:1-26)

Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read through the whole second chapter of James.

1. What are your general impressions from reading the second chapter as a whole? What did you find most inspiring or troubling? Were there any parts that seemed hard to understand?
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
3. Read James 2:1-4. The author of James seems to be aware of favoritism in the “churches” (probably still synagogues) they are writing to. Why do you think these early Christians might have been so eager to preferentially welcome wealthy people over the poor? How might we be susceptible to this today in our own church community?
4. Can you describe a time when you have felt on the receiving end of this kind of bias in church for any reason (not necessarily just financial)? How did it make you feel and what were the consequences for you? Can you describe an instance where you have been a perpetrator of such bias? What motivated this? How did you become aware of this bias?
5. Read James 2:5-7 and Luke 6:20-26. The author of James seems to be reiterating Jesus’ teaching about the poor and the rich. What do you think Jesus means? In what way are the poor blessed and the rich cursed? Is this always true for all people?
6. Read James 2:8-13. What does “mercy triumphs over judgment” mean to you in this context? In what way does humanity need judgement? In what way does it need mercy? Is it ever appropriate not to show mercy? Is it ever appropriate to judge?
7. Read James 2:14-26. How does this section relate to the section before (James 2:1-13)? Now compare this second section to Paul in Romans 3:27 - 4:4. In what ways do these two authors seem to agree or disagree about
 - The Law
 - Faith
 - Works
 - The example of Abraham in Hebrew ScriptureHow could these similarities and differences help our own practical faith grow?
8. Take some time as a group to share current needs and challenges, and then pray for one another. If you are doing these reflections alone, simply open your heart to God and share your needs.

Practice for the week: The Examen

Jesus taught us not to judge others. The letter of James applies this specifically to how we can judge people based on their economic status. There are all kinds of other ways we can be biased too, and very often we are unconscious of this as we go about daily life. This week take some time each evening to reflect on your day, seeking to be more aware of times where you may have been judgmental or biased.

The ancient Ignatian practice of *Examen* is a helpful technique for this. Sit quietly alone and take a moment to center yourself. Then “relive” your day in your imagination by allowing your thoughts to guide you through the day’s events. As you do this, focus particularly on your interactions with others—in your family, at work or school, in your neighborhood or online. These “interactions” might be your internal thoughts or attitudes, or they could be actual conversations and encounters. Do this with self-honesty but without judging yourself. Simply notice and reflect on the following:

At what moments in your day were your thoughts and actions judgmental or biased?

- What happened?
- What was the source of your judgment (why did you feel that way)?
- Were you aware at the time that you were being judgmental?
- What was the outcome?

For each of these situations what would a more merciful perspective have looked like?

- How would this have affected what happened?
- How might the outcomes have been different?
- Does anything inhibit extending mercy for you?

When you have finished reflecting, continue to sit quietly without self-judgment. Allow yourself to sink deeply into God’s presence, mercy, and acceptance. Let this consciousness pervade your awareness and embrace it. Imagine the people you’ve encountered today equally immersed in the same mercy and acceptance and open your heart to them.

Intentionally take this consciousness into the follow day each time.

Week 4: Powerful Words (James 3:1-12)

Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read James 3:1-12.

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. Why do think our words are so powerful (for good or for bad)? Can you describe a time when you were on the receiving end of negative words? Can you describe a time when you were on the receiving end of positive words? What impact did they have on you at the time, and what is their legacy today in your life?
3. Read James 3:1-5. Can you describe a time when you have used damaging words towards someone else? Can you describe a time when you have used healing words towards someone else? What motivated you in both these situations? How conscious were you of what you were saying and how you said it? What was the outcome?
4. Read James 3:6-8. How could our words “corrupt our whole body”? In what way can our words be progressively self-destructive, as the author claims here? Have you seen any evidence or a pattern of this in your own life? How might you change this progression?
5. Compare James 3:9-12 with the following passages:
 - Matthew 15:10-20
 - Matthew 7:16-20
 - Galatians 5:22-23What similarities and differences do you see? How do these passages suggest or imply we might be able to grow positively with regards to our speech?
6. The speaker on Sunday suggested that the call to perfection in James (e.g., James 3:1-2) and from Jesus (e.g., Matthew 5:43-48) means a call to authentically integrating our lives—where we practice what we preach, do what we hear, and are consistent in our expression of love to everyone. How could this be healing (saving) for us and the world? In what way does wisdom help empower us towards this?
7. If you are discussing these questions as a group, break into smaller groups of 2 or 3. Take some time to share about areas of your own life where you are struggling with the integration in question 6 above—areas where you know what is right, but you are not practicing it. After sharing, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly open your heart to God, and invite God’s wisdom and love to transform you.

Practice for the week: Ask and Trust

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. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

James 1:5-8 (NIV)

One of the main themes of the Letter of James is allowing divine wisdom to help us live integrated lives where we trust Jesus and his way, live what we believe, and practice what is real, true and good. This is not at all easy, so, just like Jesus, James simply calls us to persevere and never give up.

This week take a moment at the beginning of each day to center yourself and receive this wisdom from God. Sit in silence in a relaxed comfortable posture and focus on your breathing, which can help you be present to yourself and more aware of God's presence in and around you. Relax and let go of any tension. Breathe in God's love, and as you breathe out, let go of any fear, guilt, shame, anger, or resentment.

Ask God for wisdom by simply opening yourself and surrendering to God's presence. God is already present—completely, generously and without finding fault. As you breathe in and out, take a moment to sink into this reality and consciousness.

Trust Jesus. Now consciously accept and embody Jesus' way of life. Breathe in love and let go of fear. Breathe in acceptance and let go of the need to perform or compete. Breathe in security and let go of the need to be defensive or critical. Breathe in mercy and let go of judgement. Breathe in forgiveness and let go of resentment. Sit quietly and receptively for a few moments.

When you have finished, take this renewed consciousness into your day, and live it.

Week 5: Wisdom "From Above" (James 3:13-5:6)

Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read James 3:13-5:6.

1. What resonated with you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. What images, feelings, thoughts, or memories does the word "wisdom" evoke in you? How does wisdom relate to ethics and good moral choices, and to insight and understanding? Is wisdom more than these things?
3. Read James 3:13-18. Why do you think the author of James singles out humility as a defining characteristic of wisdom?
4. Read James 3:17 again.
 - Compare it with Matthew 5:3-12. What similarities and differences do you see?
 - Drawing on examples in your own life right now, how are these characteristics counter-cultural?
 - Which of these characteristics do you value most in others, and why?
 - Which of these characteristics do you currently struggle with?
5. Read Isaiah 32:16-17. How does this complement James 3:18? What is the relationship between peace and justice and righteousness? What implications does this have for us as a community?
6. Read James 4:1-10. How do passages like this make you feel? What is helpful and what is unhelpful about the hyperbole in this passage? Why do you think the author writes this way?
7. Read James 4:11-17. Why is it "wise" to not judge other people, and to not make assumptions about the future? How are you tempted to do one or both of these things? What might be the result of more humility (wisdom) in these two areas?
8. If you are discussing these questions as a group, break into smaller groups of 2 or 3. Take some time to share about areas of your own life where you are struggling to demonstrate humility, and pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly open your heart to God, and invite God's wisdom and love to transform you.

Practice for the week: Practicing Humility

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

James 3:13 (NIV)

Each day this week, practice one or more of the following exercises in humility. At the beginning of the day, select a practice to focus on. Ask God to bring this practice to mind throughout the day, and give you the wisdom to speak and act with love and humility in each situation you encounter:

- Listen to understand the perspective of another, rather than rushing to share your own thoughts and opinions

- Ask other people for input, advice, help, or feedback, when appropriate
- Take a genuine interest in others
- Allow others to go ahead of you in traffic or in the grocery store
- Look for small ways to serve others
- Make more of an effort to get to know people you encounter on a semi-regular basis
- Be grateful for what you have
- Try to go a whole day without judging or criticizing

At the end of the day, reflect back on your various interactions and how you responded. Do not judge yourself (it's not wise to judge!), but ask God to help you in those situations and relationships that you find difficult.

Week 6: Perseverance

Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read James 5:7-20.

1. How have you related to this series as a whole? What has stood out for you overall? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What resonated with you? Was there anything you disagreed with?
3. Read James 5:7-12. The author of James raises three issues here: patience, grumbling and swearing.
 - What might “grumbling against each other” look like in our day and age?
 - What might swearing look like in our day and age?
 - Read Matthew 5:33-37. Why do you think Jesus and the author of James warn against swearing?
 - Why do you think swearing condemns us (James 5:12)?
4. In the above passage, the author talks about patience as waiting for the “coming of the Lord.” What do you think they mean by that? Why do you think they use an agricultural metaphor here—what is the significance of this?
5. Read James 5:13-18. Given that these are close to the letter’s closing words, what strikes you most about this passage?
6. Compare James 5:15-16 with Matthew 9:1-8. Why do you think the author is so ready to emphasize this teaching of Jesus? In what way do you think our modern worldview equates forgiveness and healing?
7. If you are discussing these questions as a group, break into smaller groups of 2 or 3. Take some time to share about areas of your own life where you need healing (spiritual, emotional, or physical). If it feels appropriate, share with the others anything you feel you need to confess—anything you feel you need to share in order to let it go and experience wholeness. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly open your heart to God and invite God to heal you and make you whole.

Practice for the week: “Go after them”

My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God’s truth, don’t write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.

James 5:19-20 (The Message)

In their final words, the author of James defines perseverance as not giving up on anyone. This week, read the modern translation of these words above each morning and let them set your course for the day. Be conscious of each person you interact with who seems to be moving away from you for whatever reason—disagreement, conflict, defensiveness, etc. Try to be cognizant about why, and consciously don’t write them off, but “go after them,” in whatever practical way seems most loving.