

# LEARNING TO LIVE

*Studies in the book of James*

editor: Corey Herlevsen

series editor: Don Thiessen

LEADER'S GUIDE



Steinbach Bible College  
Steinbach, Manitoba

“When the love of God has vanished in a society,  
the love of neighbour quickly disappears.”

*Walter Brueggemann*

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## Foreword

**F**rancis of Assisi once invited a young apprentice to go with him to a nearby village in order to preach the gospel. The young monk, excited at the opportunity to hear his teacher preach, quickly agreed. Upon arriving at the village, Francis and his student began to visit the people. First, they stopped to visit the butcher as he went about his business. Next was a visit to the cobbler and, after that, a walk to the home of a widow who had just recently buried her husband. This informal visiting went on throughout the day and then Francis told the young monk that it was time they returned home to the abbey. The student didn't understand. "How can we leave? We came to the village to preach and yet you haven't yet preached a sermon!" "Haven't we?" questioned the elder teacher. "People have watched us, they have listened to us and they have responded to us. Every word we have spoken and every deed we have done this day has been a sermon. We have been preaching all day!"

I cannot help but think that James would have liked this story. To James, Christianity was a lifestyle—a lifestyle that was marked by careful attention to sound teaching and by purposeful living. For James, authentic living took the truths of Scripture and applied it on "the streets". It is a mark of James' style that his short letter of 108 verses contains more than 50 imperative verbs commanding believers to live out their faith in practical ways.

The lessons contained in this book have been 'test driven'. For 6 weeks during the winter of 2000, students taking the General Epistles course at Steinbach Bible College prepared these lessons and taught them to their peers right in the class. The result was that we were all challenged, rebuked, and encouraged to make some changes in the way we speak and in the way we live. To say the least, the teaching of James sometimes made us quite uncomfortable. Yet, even in our discomfort, we were grateful because our hearts had been challenged by the Word of God. It was one of those special courses in which the Word of God comes alive in a fresh way and all of us, teacher and student alike, are never quite the same. I am grateful to the young men and women who challenged my life in that class and who worked so hard in preparing and presenting these lessons.

In addition to the each of the students who contributed lessons in the student guide, I would like to thank Roger Peters and Theresa Hiebert who researched and prepared background papers on some of the issues dealt with in the lessons and the Leader's Guide. As we now send these lessons out, our prayer, as a class, is that your Sunday School classes will be challenged to growth in the same way.

*Corey Herlevsen*  
*New Testament and General Studies*  
*Steinbach Bible College*  
*cherlev@SBCollege.ca*

# The Background of James

## James the Israelite

It is very likely that the letter of James was written to Jewish Christians (and perhaps other non-hostile Jews as well) spread throughout the world. The middle years of the first century were a time of much civil unrest throughout the Roman Empire, some of which had to do with Rome's relationships to conquered provinces such as Judea. Some sources estimate that, by the time James wrote, there were as many as four million Jews scattered throughout the Empire. We know from the Roman historian Suetonius that the Jewish population in the city of Rome rioted several times, perhaps because of their dispute with the early Christians. The series of riots led to Caesar Claudius to expel the Jews from Rome and, consequently, some of the tension and rioting spread to other parts of the Empire. But things were not stable within the government of the Empire itself. After the violent and disastrous reign of Nero, the Empire was on the very brink of civil war and, in fact, by AD 68 some battles had broken out between Roman legions in the West. The uncertainty spread to the Capitol City and in AD 69 Rome itself appointed and dispatched four Emperors. Perhaps the tension of the era was felt most keenly in Judea where religious, ethnic and social tension boiled for years until it erupted in the Jewish War of AD 66-70. It was at the end of this war that the Roman General Titus destroyed the Temple once and for all. It is important to know that the letter we know as James was written sometime during this tense era and that it reflects the environment of first century Judaism.

For example, James 5:17 mentions the patient farmer who waits for both the early and late rains. The early and late rains were characteristic of Judea but not Italy, Egypt or even Asia Minor. Other places in the letter which reflect the Jewish background include the mention of Abraham "our father" (2:21), the use of the name *Lord Almighty* (5:4), references to Job and the prophets (5:11, 17) and the use of the word *synagogue* in 2:2 (Greek text. NIV translates this *meeting*). James writes this letter from the perspective of Jewish Christians.

In an interesting twist, the letter of James has less about the life of Jesus yet echoes more of His actual teaching than just about any other New Testament letter. Of particular interest in this regard are the many close

parallels between James and the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew's gospel. Consider the following examples:

- a. believers should not swear oaths (James 5:12; Matthew 5:33-37)
- b. believers are to rejoice in trials (James 1:2; Matthew 5:12)
- c. believers are called to be perfect/complete (James 1:4; Matthew 5:48)
- d. believers are encouraged to ask God because God is a Giver (James 1:5 P Matthew 7:7)
- e. believers are not to remain angry (James 1:20; Matthew 5:22)
- f. believers are to live in such a way that their lives prove their faith (James 2:14; Matthew 7:16-19)
- g. believers are not to slander (James 4:11; Matthew 5:22)
- h. the humble shall be exalted (James 3:13; Matthew 5:3)
- i. believers are to be pure, full of mercy and makers of peace (James 3:17-18; Matthew 5:1-10)

The Jewish background of the letter, combined with the obvious familiarity with the teachings of Jesus Himself, lead most scholars to the conclusion that the letter we know as *James* was written by the Lord's brother who became leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 15, see also Galatians 1:19, 2:9).

## **James in Light of the Old Testament Wisdom Tradition**

One of the pervasive themes of the Old Testament is the theme of wisdom. This theme is obviously developed at length in books such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, but it is by no means limited to these books. It is also a theme in diverse passages of the Old Testament. In Judges 14 the theme of wisdom is present in Samson's use of the riddle. In Psalm 78, the history of Israel is told in the form of a "parable" (the Hebrew word

here carries the meaning of “object lesson”). Finally, the theme of wisdom is also present in the prophets. An example of this is Ezekiel 14:7-8 where the Lord declares that the man who does not turn back to God will become a “byword” (an example of foolishness) among the people.

Wisdom, in the mind of Old Testament believers and the early Christians, was not the same thing as knowledge. The difference between the two can be illustrated by a simple example. When considering the problem of poverty in North America, one might do research into the sociological and economic reasons why poverty exists in the first place and which groups it affects in particular, and why. This would be the realm of knowledge. Biblical wisdom would involve taking all of this a step further and asking the question “What can I do to help the poor people in my particular community because the Bible calls me to love my neighbour as myself”. Knowledge was a theoretical thing but wisdom was practical. To have wisdom was to find the order of the universe under the Lordship of God and submit to it.

In the Biblical view, wisdom, as well as its opposite *foolishness*, were moral terms. The submission to God’s Lordship was the crucial element (Proverbs 3:5-6) and so wisdom had, at it’s core, an acknowledgement of the divine claim upon all affairs of life. This means that it was possible and, sadly, very common for one to have all kinds of knowledge and still be considered a fool. The fool who “says in his heart ‘There is no God’ (Psalm 14:1) did not necessarily deny the existence of God in theory. In the Ancient Mediterranean world, there were few, if any, atheists as we understand the term. The fool (note carefully the NIV footnote here) of Psalm 14:1 was an immoral person who lived his life as if the existence of God did not matter. He failed to submit and, in his defiance, showed disregard for God’s commandments. This disregard, in turn, would inevitably lead to a lifestyle that did not show concern or love for others. The lifestyle of a *fool* would be conspicuous in it’s failure to live out the great commandments of Deuteronomy 6:5 (love the Lord your God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbour as yourself).

Wisdom, on the other hand, transferred the rule of God into everyday conduct. James Crenshaw’s conclusion is that the wisdom tradition was handed down to the younger generation in order “to prevent them from falling into the pitfalls which confront them in the nooks and crannies of daily life in a fallen world” (Crenshaw, *Education* 1). The book of Proverbs, for example, does not speak only to behaviour in the synagogue/church. It brings wisdom to bear on such everyday things as the way we speak to others (15:1-2), the way in which we conduct business



(11:1), the way we raise our children (22:6) and the way in which we do our work (10:2-5). Wisdom was submission to the rule of God in all and any given situation that might arise as a person went about his daily life. Wisdom is “the whole power of God’s inspiration and guidance active in a human life” (Adamson 38). It was, in essence, a lifelong “learning to live” from which there was no graduation.

It is not very hard to see how the Old Testament wisdom tradition is reflected in the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 11:19) and throughout the letter of James (1:5-7, 1:26-27). In fact, wisdom is as pervasive a theme in James as faith is in the writings of Paul. As you go through these lessons, you will notice that the theme of wisdom runs through them like a thread.

## **James in Light of the Old Testament Prophets**

A common misunderstanding among Christians is that the Old Testament prophets were primarily tellers of the future. For decades many Christian best-sellers have focused attention on certain parts of Daniel, Zechariah and other prophets which, it is believed, tell of events that will transpire either in our lifetime or in the very near future. While the element of predictive prophecy is undeniably present in the prophetic books, careful study reveals that less than 1% of the Old Testament prophetic writing actually concerns events future to the time of the prophet (Fee and Stuart 150)! If that is indeed the case, then we have to ask what the bulk of the material actually speaks about. It would be fair and accurate to say that the prophets are mainly ‘covenant enforcers’ or ‘covenant mediators’. They are spokesmen for God calling God’s people back to the terms of the covenant responsibilities as laid out in the Torah – the five books of Moses. Much of what the prophets wrote is, to some extent, commentary on or explanation of the Torah. The following examples should serve to support this claim:

- a. The famous passage from Micah 6:8 (often used in church choruses) is not a new teaching. What Micah is doing is simply reminding Israel of what she already knew on the basis of passages such as Deuteronomy 10:12-13. In his role of ‘covenant mediator’, Micah is rebuking Israel for her presumptuousness and reiterating the commands to obedience contained in the book of Deuteronomy.

b. The curses pronounced on Israel in Amos 5:11-12 are likewise an example of the prophet bringing the words of Torah to bear on the current situation. The people are failing to look after one another as the covenant required (Leviticus 19:1-18) and, accordingly, the curses of the covenant are about to be visited upon them. The language of the curses in Amos 5 is very close to the language of the curses in Deuteronomy (compare Amos 5:11-12 with Deuteronomy 28:30-39).

It will become very clear that the call to social justice contained in both the Torah and the prophetic texts, such as Amos 4 and 5, resonates with the call of the letter of James. James makes the connection very clear in 2:8 where he quotes the command of Leviticus 19:18 to “Love your neighbour as yourself”, thereby fulfilling the Royal law. But the connection can also be seen in other places. For one example, consider James 1:26-27 and 5:1-6 in light of Leviticus 19:13 and Malachi 3:5. For another example, consider James 4:11 in light of Leviticus 19:16. Finally, consider James 2:1-9 in light of Leviticus 19:15. In the minds of many New Testament scholars, James is a clear example of a New Testament writing that continues the theme of Old Testament prophecy. As such, it confronts the burning social issues such as poverty and injustice, which were fermenting at that particular time and place, and addresses them in light of both the Old Testament Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus.

## **The Purpose of James: How Should We Then Live?**

James opens his letter with an exhortation to patiently endure, perhaps even embrace, trials because this is a necessary aspect of growth (1:2-4). The goal of this perseverance is maturity, completeness. The patient endurance of trials will lead to the blessing of a reward at the end of the age (1:12). To emphasize this theme, James appeals to the example of faithful prophets (particularly Job) who have been considered blessed because of their endurance (5:10-11).

There is another aspect that is very important to the thought of James. The believers who are currently suffering some form of oppression must not only endure patiently and faithfully, they must refuse to take matters into their own hands and so oppress others. The reason for this is that the Lord Almighty, the Judge, is ready to return and administer justice (5:4, 8-9). James is the only New Testament writer to use the powerful and evocative term Lord Almighty (literally *Lord Sabaoth*. Note, however, Romans 9:29 which is quoting from Isaiah 1:9). The term is used in

the Old Testament and first century Judaism to refer to the “God of the heavenly armies”. The use of this word brings to mind a picture of God as the Defender of the oppressed. This is another example of James using the language and the imagery of Torah and Prophets (compare James 5:1-6 with Deuteronomy 24:15 and Isaiah 5:9). It is because the *Lord Sabaoth* will return and administer justice that the faithful are to endure without presuming to take justice and judgement into their own hands.

## Prayer

James specifically refers to prayer in three passages (1:5-8, 4:2-3, 5:14-18). Prayer is essential and effective when it is offered in proper contexts. It must be done in the context of faith and expectation (1:6-8, 5:15). It must be done with proper motives (4:2, see also 1:5) and by an obedient, righteous individual (5:16). Further, the community of faith is an essential element. Prayer is to be done in the context of mutual submission and confession (5:16). James recognizes that prayer is an essential part of the community of believers.

A healthy ‘community of forgiveness’ is sustained by the truthful speech of prayer in the middle of a world marked by suffering and by lies.

## The Life of Wisdom

As noted above, wisdom is a predominant theme in James. First and foremost, the life of wisdom is founded upon and dependent upon God (1:5-8). In this regard, James is echoing again the thought of Proverbs 3:5-6. James exhorts his readers to obey the word and to show their obedience by the way they live (1:22-25). Their lifestyle, accordingly, will be one of humility with one another and submission to God (4:1-10). This is what it means to be wise in a foolish world that thinks indulging our own evil desire is the way to exaltation. It is also a mark of wisdom when we recognize the fact of our creaturehood and acknowledge the sovereignty of God (4:13-17).

In the thought of James, the life of wisdom is a life marked by control. There are several exhortations to control ungodly or misguided desires and impulses (1:13-15, 21, 4:1-3). In particular, James is concerned that wisdom be demonstrated in the way believers control their tongues. His calls to purity of speech (1:26, 3:1-12, 5:12) are, again, a direct echo of Proverbs (10:32, 15:4, 18:21 etc.).

Wise words, however, are not enough. James is also interested in the wise use of wealth and resources. Rich brothers are not to take pride in

their wealth because the one who does so will simply wither away (1:9-11). The prophetic rebuke of 5:1-6 implies that the unwise use of wealth leads to judgement. In line with both the Torah and the Old Testament prophets, James believes that Christian believers should be actively involved in helping and caring for the weak, the vulnerable and the oppressed in their communities. In so doing, they challenge and reject the 'normal', but foolish, standards of the world in which they live. They also demonstrate and model the love and justice of the Lord and they fulfill the Royal Law of love. The law of love, simply stated, is faith in action. Believing the right things is not enough, that belief must be demonstrated "on the streets" and in the home as believers go about their daily lives. If this does not happen, the so-called faith is nothing more than a spiritless corpse (2:26).

## Summary

In many regards, James is the New Testament expression of Hebrew wisdom literature. His letter shows the need for life to be lived in submissive wisdom according to the rule of God. God's rule is the constant, the source of order (1:17). When the wisdom from God is absent, chaos reigns. Much of James's imagery vividly portrays the disorder caused by 'natural wisdom'. We read of raging seas (1:6), forest fires (3:5), double-mindedness (1:8) and disorder (3:16). When the wisdom of God is allowed to guide our lives, the result is harmony. We will not have perfect communities, but we will have communities marked by love, forgiveness and harmony. Wisdom produces a gentle and humble lifestyle the fruit of which will be a harvest of righteousness and of peace (3:17-18).

In line with the prophets, the letter of James is a word not just to individuals but to communities of faith. According to 5:12-20, it is necessary to have a nurturing and sustaining community that will enable us to fulfill the Royal Law. The lifestyle to which James calls us can neither be learned nor lived alone. One of the gifts we have been given is the gift of community to help us discover the fullness of God's gracious love and to shape us as both active recipients and active sharers of that love (5:18-20).

## Lesson 1

# *Perseverance and Prayer*

## *James 1:1–11*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Wisdom*

One of the keys to interpreting this passage correctly is to avoid defining the word “wisdom” by our own understanding or even with the help of an English dictionary. We must define this word according to its Biblical usage and according to the rich Jewish tradition upon which James is drawing. Wisdom has three main functions in the thought of James:

1. It produces the virtues of the Christian life.
2. It enables us to stand firm in the face of trials and, accordingly, assists us in being made complete.
3. It leads to life (as opposed to our own ‘desires’ which lead to disorder and death).

This understanding of wisdom is a crucial message for Christians in North America today. The wisdom of the world tells us that if we face adversity or pain of any kind, something is wrong and we must fix it immediately. The wisdom of the world would tell someone like Meg Woodson that either there is no God at all or, if there is, He is unwilling or unable to help her. Biblical wisdom grants to those who suffer the ability to submit to the rule of God even when they do not have complete understanding.

#### *Trials of many kinds*

The language of James in this passage suggests that trials can take many different forms and can arise from both internal and external sources.

Whatever the source, the word James uses in verse 2 (NASB = When you *encounter* various trials...) makes clear that the trials are unexpected and unwelcome experiences. In fact, the Greek word translated “trials” is grammatically related to the Greek word for “attacks”. Trials and suffering do not produce wisdom and contentment in and of themselves. Everyone suffers, yet it is obvious that not everyone is wise and content. What James means is that when these unwelcome experiences do in fact come, we are to respond in joy and perseverance because that is a mark of wisdom. If we respond in wisdom and submission, these experiences can be used by God to make us mature and complete people. We become authentic - people of godly integrity in a dark world.

### *Doubt*

For pastoral reasons, it is very important that we understand what James is and is not saying about doubt in this passage. James is not condemning honest questioning and seeking of answers in the middle of trial. He well knew that the Scriptures have many examples of the people of God doing exactly that in very graphic language (e.g. Psalm 13, Psalm 35, Jeremiah 15, Jeremiah 20). In these passages, and many others, God’s people express anger, pain and doubt but they do so *within the context of an abiding faith*. The sort of doubt James condemns is an ongoing duplicity or waffling which never places the honest seeking back into the context of faith as the Psalms do. The result of this ongoing waffling is inaction, which, as we have mentioned, reflects a lack of wisdom and a lack of submission to God. In turn, this results in confusion and disorder rather than the peace and order of God.

### *Humble and high positions*

One of the social tensions tearing at the fabric of the Roman Empire was the enormous class distinction between rich and poor. It is safely estimated that 90% of the population in the Empire lived well below what we would consider the basic poverty level.

The upper class flaunted their position by a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. This, in turn, led to many violent revolts against the rich. In the Jewish war against Rome, for example, there was also a civil war between poor Jewish patriots and wealthy Jewish aristocrats. When James refers to brothers in either humble or high positions, he is making it clear that these tensions are also being felt within the church community itself. If this problem is allowed to fester, the result will be that the disorder of society ends up being mimicked in the church rather than the rule and

peace of God spreading from the church into the world. The brotherhood of believers was to reflect the equality of people living under the rule of the Father and Judge, not the class distinctions of society.



## Teaching Tips

⇒ Allow people time and space to reflect on the issues raised in Meg Woodson’s letter in the Life Response story. Being free to comment and ask questions about Meg’s response might help them to answer the personal questions 1 and 2 more honestly.

⇒ When the group discusses question 3, try not to limit the discussion to trials related to illness. There may be some present who have faced trials such as persecution for their faith, racial prejudice, or even the trial of being social outcasts. These experiences would be very much in line with the experiences of James’ first readers. See if the response to question 3 changes according to how the class defines, and has experienced trials.

⇒ When dealing with the section on “The Rich and the Poor”, carefully consider what was said in the previous section. Are our churches maintaining the class distinctions of the world around us or are we challenging them? Are we spreading the message of The God of justice to our world?

⇒ Consider choosing one of the questions below as “food for thought” for your class. For each lesson, the “Learning to Live” section will provide ideas for personal growth exercises, class discussions or for class preparation. It is intended that you as a teacher will creatively choose exercises that will challenge your class and modify them as necessary in order to achieve your teaching goals.

## Learning to Live

1. Trials often serve to reveal the character we have allowed ourselves, and others within our families and community, to develop. In the context of affluent North American communities, we often

expect things to go our way and according to our timetables (count the number of watches and clocks and calendars we use on a daily basis)! The result of this attitude is that, when a crisis comes, it is lack of character and integrity which is revealed. What steps can be taken on an ongoing basis to counteract this wisdom of the world?

2. One of the very first questions Christopher Columbus asked upon arriving in the New World had to do with money. His actual log entry for Saturday October 13, 1492 reads "*Yo estava atento y trabajava de saber si avia oro*". Roughly translated, the entry says "And I took great care and effort to determine if there was any gold here". Five hundred years on, North America is still chanting variations of "show me the money!" Social analyst Leonard Sweet suggests that consumerism is actually the biggest threat to the Christian worldview and one of the biggest obstacles to evangelism. Have an individual, or group, read *Life Ring #3* in Leonard Sweet's book *Soul Tsunami* and report back to the class on ways your group can begin to make a difference in your community. If you do not have access to this book, consider doing research on some of the social issues present in your community and come up with one practical way you can make a difference.



## Lesson 2

# *Trials and Temptations* *James 1:12–18*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Temptations*

The word translated *temptations* in verses 13-14 is the same word which is translated *trials* in verses 2 and 12. This can lead to some difficulty if these words were to be translated the same in each case. Then James would seem to be saying that, on the one hand, God sends ‘tests’ in order to strengthen our character (1:2-11) but then, on the other hand, God neither tests nor tempts (1:13-14). The fact that the root word is the same does not mean, however, that there is no difference between a *trial* and a *temptation*. In English it is perfectly acceptable to use the same word to bring out two different meanings. In watching the nightly news last week, I noticed this with the word *sanction*. The failure of the Palestinian leaders to control the terrorist groups was said to be evidence that the leaders were actually *sanctioning* violence. This is a positive use of the word *sanction* where it means “to approve”. In the same newscast, however, there was a brief mention of the trade sanctions the United States continues to level against Iraq. Here, *sanction* is a negative thing. In the same way, James is using a flexible word to bring across two truths. It is clear enough from the Old Testament that God did, in fact, send *tests* to His people (Genesis 22:1, Deuteronomy 8:2, 13:3, Judges 2:22 etc.).

Unlike the temptations which James is addressing, however, God did not test Israel with the goal of having them fail and give in. His intention and desire was that they would persevere and grow. In the thought of James, *trials* are something to be endured but *temptations* are something to be avoided. Obviously, there can also be some overlap between the two. A

*trial* (such as being persecuted for your faith) can lead to *temptation* (to do something like denying your faith and/or giving in to hatred towards the persecutors). What James is saying is that a person enduring a difficult situation and chooses to sin and, giving in to temptation, can not and dare not say that God was responsible for their response to the trial. In other words, “God may be the Author of trials by which He intends to strengthen us, but He is not to blame if we misconstrue them as temptations which lead us to sin” (Nystrom 79).

### *Father of Lights*

In 1:17, James goes a step further and says that, far from sending temptations to break people, God is actually the source of good gifts – including the gift of regeneration. In his use of the phrase *Father of lights*, James seems to be declaring that God is the Creator of the stars and the Lord over all things in the heavens and the earth and that He is entirely consistent and reliable. It is possible that he is combating a common first century belief (still around today!) that a person’s destiny could be found in the stars rather than in God (Martin 31-32). The phrase “moving/shifting shadows” was one often used by first century astronomers to describe the irregular moving of heavenly bodies (i.e. the variable planets as opposed to the stationary stars).

See the similar idea in Jude 13 (which also has the wild waves imagery that we saw in James 1:6).



## Teaching Tips

➔ When responding to question 1, people might not be willing or able to discuss aloud the particular temptations with which they struggle. Have them ponder the question and, perhaps, take a few minutes and have them write two or three recurring temptations which have arisen as their response to trials. (For example, in doing this exact exercise with someone I recently counselled, it became clear that this person repeatedly turned to alcohol and then to hostile verbal attacks as a response to difficult interpersonal situations. The situation was the trial, alcohol, the temptation, and the choice to turn to that

instead of to God. This would be an example of the foolishness to which James speaks). See if the group can identify some common areas in which temptations come. If someone chooses to share a more personal answer with the group, try to be specific yet discreet. Maintain the dignity of both the person and the group.

➤ Also in regards to question 1 (as well as the Life Response story), have the class explore the connection between the trials they are going through (relationally, socially, health-wise) and the temptations they go through. Do temptations increase in number and strength during times of trial?

➤ When dealing with question 3, consider adding an additional sub-question. Are there any differences between the society as a whole and the church in regards to the areas and desires through which temptation and deception is coming? Are there areas in which the church is tempted and society as a whole is not?

➤ Consider choosing one of the questions below as “food for thought” for your class.

## Learning to Live

1. When I was working on this lesson, there was a disaster in Israel where a building collapsed during a wedding party and hundreds of people were injured and several were killed (some of the people in your class may remember seeing news coverage of this incident). It seems that human error and/or greed was one of the major factors in this disaster. Do you remember what your response was when you first heard of this? How did God fit into your picture? If this accident can be considered a “trial”, what possible “temptations” could it lead us into?
2. In 1968, Richard Nixon accepted the nomination of the Republican party to run for President of the United States. In his acceptance speech, he said “Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth, to see it as it is and to tell it like it is, to find, speak and live the truth”. Nine years of trials and circumstances seemed to have changed President Nixon’s mind. In an interview with CBS news

in 1977, he said “When a President does it, then it is not illegal”. It is easy to point fingers at Richard Nixon.

3. In what ways have you been justifying your behaviour and/or your temptations and saying “When I do it, it is different”?
4. Is it possible, in our North American context, that compassion and the desire to live out our faith can lead us into temptation to sin? In what areas? Give some examples. How do we balance the need to avoid this kind of temptation with the need to reach out in word and action?

## Lesson 3

# *Listen, Obey... Action!*

## *James 1:19–27*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger*

The concept of wise speech is found far and wide in the tradition of Hebrew wisdom (see especially Proverbs). There are also several examples of these themes from Greek and Roman literature of the period. Given the social, religious and ethnic tension of the period, it is quite possible that James is contrasting Biblical wisdom with the spirit of religious revolution sweeping across the land. The Zealots in particular would be brought up short by what James says. The method of the Zealots was to fire up the people (especially the poor and oppressed – the very groups to which James speaks!) with fiery rhetoric. When the crowd was riled up enough, the Zealots would strike out at the Romans using the tactics of guerilla warfare – particularly the short daggers known as *sicarri*. They believed that ridding the land of the Romans by force made the mercenaries God’s righteous agents of deliverance. James, however, insists that righteous action can not spring from the bitter source of anger. That way is not the way of wisdom but of foolishness. He associates righteousness with peace, with gentleness and with purity.

#### *Do what it says*

The idea of “doing” or “practising” what the Word says is a common Old Testament thought (e.g. Deuteronomy 28:58, Exodus 24:3).

Jesus picks up this theme and the imagery of Proverbs 9 when He says “The one who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man building his house upon a rock” (Matthew 7:24). So both the teaching of James and the teaching of first century Judaism would

agree on the basic point that holiness would be connected to the “doing of the Word”. The difference between the two is made clear by how the concept of holiness is defined. For James, as for Jesus, to be holy was to reflect the character of God by showing compassion and mercy. Holiness involved action – it involved “loving the neighbour as yourself” as James makes clear by quoting this verse in 2:8. First century Judaism tended to define holiness quite differently. To them, holiness was passive separation from the world, drawing clear boundary lines to keep the unclean and undesirable ones away. Even a casual reading of the Gospels reveals that this basic disagreement on what it meant to be holy was at the heart of many of Jesus’ confrontations with the Pharisees.

At any rate, James is insistent that holiness requires a life of action. Believers are to continue to grow in our ability and our willingness to carry out the commands laid on us by the hearing of God’s word.

### *A man who looks at his face in a mirror*

Mirrors were not actually a common household item in James’ time. The few that were available were made with Corinthian bronze, copper, tin or silver polished to reflect light. Only those who were fairly well off had enough resources to have mirrors in the household. It is possible, therefore, that James is making a subtle comment about the rich as he has done in chapter 1 and will do later in chapter 5.

What is certain is that a rushed person’s casual look into an imperfect mirror illustrates those who rush through God’s word without being obedient.

### *The perfect law that gives freedom*

The emphasis on the law is one of the reasons why Martin Luther, among others, struggled with and stumbled over the book of James. To Luther, James was “a right strawy epistle” because it failed to mention justification by faith and failed to “show thee Christ”. The relationship between the law of the Old Testament and the New Testament emphasis on grace is complex, yet it is also one of the most intriguing issues in Biblical studies. While it can not be fully dealt with here, a few observations are in order.

- a. The traditional Protestant understanding of the Law has been that Jews of the first century kept the law in order to earn the favour of God and “work their way to heaven”. Over the past few decades, however, the consensus among Biblical scholars is that this view is a cari-

capture of Judaism influenced heavily by Martin Luther. (See, for example, Sanders, E.P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Dunn, J.D.G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* and Wright, N.T. *The Climax of the Covenant*). Although they do not agree on every point, these scholars suggest that the problem was that the Jewish practice of the Law was that the Jews were using the law defensively. Instead of being the people of God reflecting Him to the world, they were arrogantly trying to keep themselves pure and free from scandal. Their misplaced “obedience” came at the expense of meeting people’s needs and spreading the mercy and the mission of God. This is why Jesus quotes the prophet’s “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 12:7).

b. For James, as for Jesus, the intentions or principles of the Law take priority over the first century nit-picky adherence to the letter of the Law. Outward actions are important because, as Jesus said, “by their fruits you shall know them”. However, to concentrate on outward actions alone can leave us open to the danger of mistaking motives. It is possible for actions that, on the surface look holy, to actually be unholy and even evil. In Mark 2 and 3, for example, the actions of the Pharisees may have looked holy but they were actually unholy because of the motive of their hearts. James seems to be defining Law in such a way that it frees Christians from self-interest and immorality, and allows them to live in such a way that they reflect God to their world.

### *Pure and faultless religion*

The difference between the wisdom of the world and God’s wisdom couldn’t be clearer than it is at this point. The wisdom of the world befriends the strong and powerful, the movers and shakers, the ones who can help advance our cause or get us ahead in the world. Certainly, the social revolutionaries of James’ time recruited the strong ones in their communities. Scripture, however, has always maintained that the will of God is to protect the vulnerable and the weak (Exodus 22:20-24, Deuteronomy 10:18, Isaiah 1:16-17, Psalm 146:9, Matthew 25, etc.). We do well to remember that the words of the chorus often sung in our

churches “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never ending stream” are based on Amos 5:24. From the overall context of Amos 5 it is clear that, unless we practice the true religion James calls for, the justice and righteousness we sing for will not happen.



## Teaching Tips

⇒ When using the Life Response story to introduce the topic for the day, ask the class what the topic and the text of last week’s sermon was. (If you want, this can be done in writing so that answers can be compared. It is sometimes amusing to see the differences in what people heard/perceived from the same message!). Ask also if there were any specific changes, actions or decisions in their life based on what they have been learning from the last few sermons and classes.

⇒ Research the topic of wise speech in the book of Proverbs (a concordance or a commentary with a topical index will help you with this. The *Expositors Bible Commentary*, Volume 5 has a nice index on speech on page 902). This study will help you understand the background and content of what James is saying here and will prepare you for the development of this theme in James 3.

⇒ Research the topic of anger in the Bible (consider texts like Psalm 4:4, Ephesians 4:26, Matthew 5:21-26, Mark 3:5 among others). When the class discusses question 4, be prepared to share some of this information with the class to help guide the discussion.

⇒ Ask your class if the writer of this lesson (and the commentary she quotes) goes too far by suggesting that a relationship with God is “nonexistent” if there is no action behind the profession of faith.

⇒ Consider choosing one of the following questions as “food for thought” for your class.



# Learning to Live

1. In most communities there are several agencies devoted to helping those who, for various reasons, find themselves in need of assistance. If you do not already have one, make a list of those which operate in your community (e.g. food banks, care homes, women's shelters, crisis centres, Association for Community Living, etc.). Are there ways in which your class, your church's youth group, or your church as a whole can get involved and "do what James says"?
2. Walker Percy, in the book *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, asks some interesting questions. Here are some samples: "Why is it possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab nebula in Taurus which is 6,000 light years away than you presently know about yourself even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life?" And "How is it possible that men who can design a craft like Voyager 19 (which arrived at Titania, a moon of Uranus, 3 seconds off schedule and 100 yards off course after a flight of six years) can have no idea how to live with other people, how to build a marriage or how to raise healthy families?" How would you answer him?
3. Keep a written record of your speech patterns for any given period of time. Does your speech edify or does it tear down? In light of James 1:26, what does your speech reveal about your obedience to the Word? What difference have your speech and your actions made in the life of your family? Your church? Your community?
4. According to George Barna (*Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators, 118*), Pastors are "the single most occupationally frustrated professionals in North America". How might the failure of North American churches live up to what James is saying in this section?

## Lesson 4

# *Favouritism*

## *James 2:1–13*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Class distinctions*

There are a few noteworthy differences between the culture James is addressing and our own. One difference is that in James' world there was virtually no possibility of being upwardly mobile. There was no way to climb the ladder either economically or socially whereas our economy is based on the idea that we can and should rise to a higher station in life. Another difference is that in James' world there was virtually no middle class. It is estimated that 8% of the population of the Roman Empire had wealth, 2% were 'upper middle class' while 90% were poor. A Roman census dating to the first century indicates that in Rome itself, for every private house owned by the wealthy, there were 26 blocks of tenement apartment dwellings for the poor!

As the student guide mentions, the legal system reflected these class distinctions. James could be confident (2:6) that the rich would exploit the poor and drag them into court because in the Roman world the State itself seldom pressed charges of any kind. Private citizens brought charges for things such as non-payment of debt. The catch was that the charges only worked one way. Social inferiors were not permitted to initiate lawsuits against the rich.

The grammar of James suggests that (poor) Christians were being dragged into court because they owed wealthy people money and this situation is giving the population at large reason to slander the name of Christ.

## *The Royal Law*

James argues that the favouritism and class distinctions seen in Roman culture go against the basic principles of Scripture. If the believers mimic society by discriminating against the poor, they are guilty of violating the love commandment of Leviticus 19:18. Further, if they are guilty of breaking the love commandment, they are guilty of breaking the spirit of the entire Torah. Therefore, they essentially place themselves alongside those who are slandering the name of God. As mentioned in the introduction to James above, this line of thought is entirely in keeping with the witness of the Old Testament prophets.

### *Do not commit adultery... do not commit murder*

The point James is making is that the commandment to love, which has its nucleus in Leviticus 19, is all encompassing. We can neither be picky about who is to be the neighbour nor when we might choose to follow this law. By appealing to these two particular words of the Ten Commandments, James highlights two particular ways in which lawbreakers violate the honour of other human beings. This demonstrates that, no matter what they might say, their personal gratification is more important than the command to love. To James, this way of living is the very epitome of what it means to be foolish. Most of us have no problem accepting that adultery and murder are despicably sinful acts.

The shock is that James seems to be placing the sin of discrimination, or favouritism, on the same level as the most horrific of sins (See also Matthew 5:21-30).

### *Judgement without mercy*

It is not at all likely that James is referring to final judgement as if an instance of favouritism condemns a person to damnation. Rather, he is pointing to the danger of allowing an attitude of favouritism to grow within an individual and then within a church community. If the growth of this sinful discrimination is not halted, the result will be a hardening of character and a lifestyle of sin will develop and possibly spread. This, in turn, may lead to damnation. On the other hand, there is the possibility of mercy being shown and being received in the Christian community. This mercy can also spread and bring life. In this regard, James is very much in line with the Old Testament (Exodus 34:5-6, Hosea 6:6) and the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5:7).



## Teaching Tips

➤ Although there are major differences between our culture and that confronted by James, there is little doubt that our culture is also sick and dangerous. In the weeks prior to teaching this lesson, pay close attention to the messages you see and hear in the media (radio, TV programs, TV news, videos, magazines, catalogues, the Internet, etc.). In what ways, subtle or otherwise, are we conditioned to pursue appearance and/or status at the expense of substance? In what ways are we conditioned to discriminate? Keep a record of this and describe it to your class. Show examples wherever possible.

➤ When discussing question 1 and 2, also discuss actual situations that have either occurred in your church or community or have been experienced by members of the class. Do not, however, get into finger pointing or evaluations of who handled the situation well and who did not (do not violate the law of love! James 2:8). Keep the discussion focused on how James 2 speaks to situations like this.

➤ Consider choosing one of the questions below as “food for thought” for your class.

## Learning to Live

### *Thoughts to Ponder for the Week Ahead*

1. Assign an individual, or group, to watch the video series *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. Have the group discuss the ways in which the different churches represented in the video reflect the discrimination, assumptions and the social situation of the culture around them and then report back to the class as a whole.
2. What is your church doing to ‘unstuff’ people’s lives and free them from being connoisseurs of consumerist pop culture?

3. In the movie *Casablanca*, the character Ugarte (played by Peter Lorre) says to the hero Rick (played by Humphrey Bogart), “You despise me, don’t you Rick?” “I probably would”, replies Rick, “if I gave you any thought at all”. Who in our communities would understand what it feels like to be Ugarte?
4. In regards to the issue of favouritism, is there a difference between being non-judgmental (as James calls us to be) and being overly tolerant (as Canadian society calls us to be)?
5. As an experiment, ask any group to form a circle and hold hands. Almost inevitably, they will form a circle where everyone in the group is facing inward. Why do we naturally make circles that face inward rather than outward? What does that body language communicate? Are our churches guilty of doing things in such a way that it looks like an exclusive “inward circle”? Are there ways of forming a circle that do not communicate exclusiveness? Are there ways of “doing church” that communicate a sense of mercy, openness, and acceptance?

## Lesson 5

# *Faith and Works*

## *James 2:14–26*

### Keep in Mind

#### *James and Paul*

This is unquestionably one of the most debated and contested passages in James, possibly even in the New Testament. The heart of the question has been whether James is contradicting Paul's emphasis on justification by faith alone. This is one of the main reasons why Martin Luther stumbled over the book of James. He was not the last to do so. As late as 1974, New Testament scholar, George Eldon Ladd, wrote that the "admission of a verbal contradiction (between James and Paul) was unavoidable" (Ladd 592). Ladd's solution was twofold: 1) He suggests that James is battling a perversion of Paul's teaching which arose after letters such as Romans and Galatians began to circulate; 2) James and Paul are using the terms "faith" and "works" differently. They are dealing with different shades of meaning. Faith, for Paul, is personal trust whereas for James, faith is orthodox teaching (see a similar use of the term in Jude 3). Works, for Paul, are Jewish deeds of formal obedience which provide a means for boasting whereas, for James, works are deeds of Christian love. They are expressions of the Royal Law.

These two suggestions are very helpful and go a long way to solving the problem. We must be careful that we allow James and Paul to speak without automatically reading these verses through the prism of Protestant tradition.

Although the discussions are not always easy, much of the alleged contradiction is removed when James and Paul are read on their own terms and in light of the situations they were addressing.

In regards to the word *faith*, there is a continuum in the New Testament (in Greek the words *faith* and *believe* are the same root word). James can talk about the demons having a *faith/belief* (2:19) in the oneness of God—the central tenet of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4). Yet this is clearly not a saving faith in their case. It is, in fact, a prime example of foolishness in that their belief does not produce change in either character or action. (Note carefully that even the faith of the demons is not entirely passive. They are not indifferent to the belief in one God. They do respond, but they respond with a shudder of terror produced by their decision not to submit). For James, a saving faith would show itself in a life of submission and service lived under the Lordship of Christ.

It is not only James who makes this distinction between saving faith and “dead faith”. In John 2:11, for example, the disciples put their faith in Jesus on the basis of the miracle at Cana. A little later, in John 3:16, Jesus says that the ones who *believe* in Him will not perish but have eternal life. Yet, in John 6:66, many of the disciples turn away because of a hard saying and no longer follow Him. Thus, their earlier faith was not a saving faith of the kind described in 3:16. Some followers seemed to recognize that God was at work in the person of Jesus yet they refused the step of submitting to it and living by it.

In regards to the term *works*, it is, as mentioned above, a bit of a caricature to say that the Jewish people believed that they were working for salvation by the deeds that they did. As mentioned in the Leader’s Guide for lesson three, research has shown that Paul has something specific in mind when he uses the phrase “works of the law” in a negative way. The reference is to acts of obedience to the Jewish law (not just the Old Testament but also the oral traditions of the Rabbis) which were done “in order to demonstrate one’s election and status in the family of God” (Nystrom 157). The “boasting in the law” that Paul speaks against was the arrogant boasting that one was in the elect group while everyone else was shut out. It was, in essence, a display of the very sort of elitism and prejudice that James is combating throughout chapter 2 of his letter. This helps to explain why different groups within Judaism had different ‘rules’. The Essene group, as an example, had very narrow boundary markers which they used to show that their group alone was righteous. For this group, the Pharisees and Sadducees were hopelessly corrupt and their very presence polluted Jerusalem to the point that the Essenes could no longer even live there (for further study, see Dunn, “Theology of Galatians”).

It seems clear that James is using the word *works* in a slightly different way than is Paul. For James, *works* are not these boundary markers by which certain sects of Jews boasted that they alone were covenant people. James is referring to specific acts of Christian love which fulfil the royal law of Leviticus 19:18. These acts of love, in the thought of James, should flow naturally out of a Christian because a Christian belongs to God and God is a God of love and mercy.

What James is saying, in essence, is that it is not enough to simply believe the correct doctrine. The doctrine must be fleshed out and lived out. This is why James can say that Abraham's faith was "made complete" (NIV) or "perfected" (NASB) by what he did. In modern slang we might say that Abraham didn't just "talk the talk. He walked the walk!"



## Teaching Tips

⇒ Allow the class an opportunity to discuss what they have been taught about the whole issue of faith/works. Why has much of evangelical Christianity been so careful not to put very much emphasis on works? Is the Anabaptist position different? How?

⇒ The Bible Truth for this lesson says "If Christ is really Lord, then the marks of His Lordship will appear in our lives". Ask your class to consider the marks of His Lordship which are evident in their lives and in the church as a community of believers. What are you doing very well? What needs to be changed? How?

⇒ Consider choosing one of the following questions "food for thought" for your class.



# Learning to Live

1. Find a copy of Chuck Colsons' book *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*. Read the chapters entitled "Being the Light" and "Being the Salt". Decide on one practical way you and/or your church can be salt and light in your community. Then do it!
2. Spend some time surfing the website of Habitat for Humanity [www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org), especially the link *How it Works*. What do you think James would make of their "Economics of Jesus" and their "Theology of the Hammer"? (Incidentally, it turns out that Habitat attracts far more church volunteers for projects where Jimmy Carter is involved. It seems that people want to serve more when it will give them a chance to rub shoulders with an ex-President. I wonder what James might think about that in light of what he just wrote in 2:1-8).
3. Check out the website for the Community of San't Egidio [www.santegidio.org](http://www.santegidio.org) or read about this group in the last chapter of Thomas Cahill's book *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*.
4. Consider a class "field trip" to either one of the community services mentioned in lesson three or one that operates in the city of Winnipeg. Be sure to allow time for debriefing and discussing what you have seen.
5. Listen to the song "Hands" by Jewel Kiltcher (on the CD *Spirit* Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1998). To what extent does this song capture what James is saying?

## Lesson 6

# *Was it Something I Said?*

## *James 3:1–12*

### Keep in Mind

#### *The Tongue in Proverbs and the Wisdom Tradition*

James is picking up and developing a theme which he mentioned earlier in the letter (Refer back to the Leader's guide for the lesson on James 1:19-27. A study of the theme of wise and foolish speech in the book of Proverbs will greatly enrich your understanding of this section.

#### *Gehenna*

We tend to write off the harmful things we say regardless of whether they were intended to hurt or just so-called “slips of the tongue”. James uses the strongest language at his disposal to emphasize that “slips of the tongue” might not be so harmless after all. They may, in fact, represent the initial stage of the biological growth of evil to which he referred in 1:14-15. To reinforce how our use of the tongue can reflect foolishness and evil, James uses the word *gehenna* (NIV and NAS = hell). Dismissing or downplaying this image is really along the same lines as a Doctor downplaying or dismissing the symptoms of cancer in a patient (Nystrom 183). In both cases, something harmful and deadly is allowed to grow. In the Old Testament, the Valley of Hinnon (*gehenna*) was the site of the detestable child sacrifices offered to Baal and to Molech (2 Kings 23:10).

In the time of Jeremiah, this same valley was called the “Valley of Slaughter” because the Babylonians killed many Jews and dumped their bodies there to be burned (Jeremiah 7:29-34). During the historical period between the Old and New Testaments, Jewish literature began to use the word *gehenna* to refer to the darkness and unquenchable fires of hell. This is the sense in which James uses the word.

It is noteworthy that this is the only time in the New Testament where someone other than Jesus uses this word, a fact which shows again the connection between the teaching of James and that of Jesus (see, for example, Matthew 5:22, 5:29-30, 10:28). We dare not minimize the force of this word in this passage. *Gehenna* is symbolic of the very force of Satan and the destruction he causes among human beings created in the image of God. The way in which we speak to, and about, one another might not only be a reflection of what we think of the image bearers. It may, in fact, reflect what we really think of God. It might not be too much to suggest, as some commentators do, that the way in which we use our tongue is an indication of our willingness to be a receptor for Satan (e.g. Nystrom 182).

### *Bits... rudders... fire*

As a good teacher in the wisdom tradition, James uses illustrations from the world at hand to illustrate his point. The more literate people hearing James being read would have seen the many connections between these images and the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 39:1-3, Proverbs 16:27, 26:21). But these images were familiar enough to all levels of society in the Ancient Mediterranean and were, in fact, commonly used in the literature of the Greek and Roman world.

### *Made in God's likeness*

This phrase in 3:9 is the culmination of the argument from the order of creation began in verses 7-8. As the "crown of creation", humankind is created in the image of God. Although it should not be reduced to just this concept, the "image" certainly carries the idea of delegated authority. Humanity was given the dignity to represent the rule of God on the Earth (Psalm 115:16, etc.). Although it's a sobering thought, it is clear to see that when we use our tongue to destroy other image bearers we distort our own representation of God in the world. It is a sinful corruption of our authority and our dignity. It is not surprising that, in some branches of Jewish teaching, to lash out at someone with your tongue is to be guilty of rebellion against God Himself.



## Teaching Tips

➤ After the discussion of the Life Response story (which for some groups might be fairly light light-hearted), zero in on question 1. Spend a couple of moments explaining the background of the *gehenna* image to the class. This will help to underscore the seriousness of the issue at hand. Perhaps it would be beneficial for your group, if you allowed time for confession and for prayer.

➤ Question 2 is meant to provoke discussion regarding the “priesthood of believers” concept developed in the New Testament (see for example 1 Peter 2:4-10). The discussion should lead to the conclusion that some believers have been given the gift of teaching but every believer is responsible in some way to guide and teach others in the Body of Christ.

➤ The way in which we raise our children, for example, is an act of teaching which has profound implications for our church community both as they watch us do it and as our kids begin to live according to the model they have been given.

➤ The lesson in the student guide refers to the destruction caused by the impact of the speeches of Hitler. To show the other side of the power of speech, have each member of the class try to think of someone in history whose words have impacted the world for good. (You may want to consider disallowing the obvious example of Jesus).

➤ Consider choosing one of the following questions as “food for thought” for your class.

# Learning to Live

1. For the lesson on James 1:19-27, it was suggested that you invite your students to keep track of their speech. Those who did not do so then can be given another invitation to try. Those who did this exercise earlier can go through it a second time to see how they have grown.
2. Think back to the last few times you have used your tongue in an unfortunate way. Try the “I Wish I Had Said...” exercise. This involves a brief description of the situation (“A friend asked me to do a favour for him and I was really too busy and under a lot of pressure”), a brief summary of your actual response (“Not another one! Don’t you think I have enough stuff of my own to do?”) and a brief summary of what you wish you would have said, (“I’d like to help but I’m feeling really pressured to get my own work done today. I’m sorry, I just can’t help you out right now”).
- 3) For a very interesting look at how the theme of the “evil tongue” (*lashon hara*) has been developed within Judaism, spend some time surfing <http://www.torah.org.il/learning/halashon/>.
- 4) Watch the video *Teacher of the Year* (Focus on the Family Educational Films). This is a very informative and powerful look at the power a teacher has to either build or destroy with nothing more than a few words. This video is required viewing in my Introduction to Church Ministries course here at Steinbach Bible College.
- 5) Consider how the desire for power and control might be behind the way in which people lash out at others verbally. Look through books or other resources that deal with abuse to see how this dynamic is often present in these situations. One example is Johnson, David and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. If you do not have access to this book, a summary is available on-line at <http://www.caic.org.au/biblebase/precond1.htm>.
6. Christians are, unfortunately, often known for being vicious with their tongues. Read the chapter entitled “Christian McCarthyism” in Philip Yancey’s book *Finding God in Unexpected Places* and/or the chapter “Mixed Aroma” from his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace*.

## Lesson 7

# *Oh Wise One*

## *James 3:13–18*

### Keep in Mind

*The wisdom that comes from God is first of all pure; then peace-loving*

The Biblical notion of peace is the thread that ties a number of ideas together in this passage. While the topic of peace (*shalom*) is very broad and can not be treated in depth here, it is important to understand some of the Biblical themes which cluster around the concept of *shalom*.

**Creation:** In contrast to the nations around Israel, the basic biblical view of creation is that matter is good. In the fallen world, God acts to transform both matter and history. His people either contribute to this, or don't, by the choices they make and by the way they live. The world lacks *shalom* because God's rule is rejected.

**Covenant:** The purpose of the covenant is to restore God's sovereignty and *shalom* among human kind. The covenant clarifies that God is a God of grace and of judgement.

**Community:** The covenant is the foundation of the new community of God's people. Living in *shalom*, as a community of prayer, faithfulness, forgiveness, and expectation (Mark 11:25-26), they become the medium and the message of reconciliation (Ephesians 2, 3).

It is important to realize, given what we have seen so far in James, that the Old Testament clearly links the concept of *shalom* with the effects of human speech. Psalm 34:12-14, for example, makes it quite clear that to pursue peace one must keep the tongue from evil. Zechariah 8:16-19 gives the other side of this by indicating that to love truth and peace is to speak the truth and render justice in the courts (note carefully the con-

nection between justice and peace and compare this to what we have seen in places such as James 2:1-12).

**Offices:** In Israel, and in the church, the community is maintained, and strengthened, as certain people are set apart to minister according to their office (Old Testament) and/or giftedness (New Testament). Important factors include worship, discipleship, confession, and active peacemaking. This is in line with what James has to say about the responsibility of teachers in 3:1-12.

**The Cross:** The symbol of God’s most definitive self-disclosure. The cross, in defeating evil and hostility, made possible a new creation and a making of peace (Ephesians 2:14-22). The purpose of the new community is to reconcile human kind to each other and to God (II Corinthians 5:14-21). We do this to the degree that Christ-likeness and the example of the Cross marks our lives. The way to achieve peace is not to pursue the worldly path of power but the path of humility and service. James seems to be echoing this thought in 3:13-14.

**Relationships:** *Shalom* involves solid and edifying relationships between people. This is what James is getting at in 4:1-12. It is important to realize, however, that this is most emphatically not a “peace at any cost” concept.

Ignoring sin and failing to deal honestly with issues in the interest of maintaining an artificial “peace” is more like false wisdom than true wisdom. Justice is necessary for peace to flow (Isaiah 48:18).



## Teaching Tips

➔ To orient the class to the notion of peace underlying many of the questions in the student guide, consider having the class as a whole list out the impressions they have of relationships within the church. The focus should be on relationships in general and the list should contain both positive and negative impressions. Follow this up by having them give a list of explanations as to why they believe relationships are this way. The point of all this is not to criticize or point fingers! The point is

to see how closely the items listed by the members of your class correspond to the list of vices and virtues outlined in James. This leads naturally into the first set of questions in the student guide.

➡ Consider choosing one of the questions below as “food for thought” for your class.

## Learning to Live

### *Thoughts to Ponder for the Week Ahead*

1. For a Mennonite perspective on the use of power, read chapter 9 of Jon Bonks' *The World at War The Church at Peace* and carefully consider the study question provided in that book. Interestingly enough, the same perspective is readily apparent in Richard Hays *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* – a book not written from a Mennonite perspective.
2. Read a few examples of relationship advice provided by advice columnists in your newspaper or in magazines. To what extent is the advice given in line with what James says in 3:17-18? To what extent is it really reflecting the false wisdom of 3:13-16 while masquerading as “wisdom”?
3. A friend borrows \$100 and promises to pay you back on payday. Payday comes and goes, as does another payday and still there is no sign of the money or even a mention of it. You know that the person has not forgotten about it and you also know that the person has enough money to pay you back but has made no move to do so. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Let him or her show it by thinking through how to approach and resolve this situation in the spirit of James 3:13-18.
4. If you happen to be watching TV or a video anyway, take note of the power relationships between characters in the show. Does the show honestly and accurately portray the results of “false wisdom” or is it an attempt to masquerade? What faulty notions of relationships and of peace have we as churches picked up from pop culture?



5. The contrast between “true wisdom” and “false wisdom” is particularly acute for young people (youth groups, college age young adults). In the post-modern age, messages come at us from all angles at lightning quick speed. Parents and youth leaders in your Sunday School class might want to pursue this topic a bit further to learn about how the “false wisdom” both comes at young people and how/why it impacts them.

A good resource to help with this is <http://www.antithesis.com/>. In particular they may wish to click on the “recent reviews” section to read articles which both explain the appeal of cultural phenomena (such as Britney Spears and the *Left Behind* series) and suggest a balanced response very much in keeping with James’ emphasis on wisdom.

## Lesson 8

# *Repentance and Submission*

## *James 4:1–10*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Come near to God and He will come near to you*

James may be using a particular Jewish idiom which is often used in Scripture (especially in regards to the Kingdom of God). The phrase “come near”, in Biblical eschatology, often means “has arrived” or “is right at hand”. For example, when Jesus says “The Kingdom of God is near” in Mark 1:15, he does not mean that the Kingdom is on it’s way and will arrive at a point in the near future. He means something like “in My person and with My activity, the Kingdom of God has begun to arrive”.

Likewise, when James says “come near to God” he is not simply suggesting that we resolve to pray more or improve our devotional lives. It is more profound and far-reaching than that. It has to do with our whole lives. He means something like “enter fully into the presence of God, embrace the fullness of your relationship with him as you live in this world”.

#### *Wash your hands and purify your hearts*

This language reflects the language and the image of passages such as the cleansing sections of Leviticus (Leviticus 10-15). In the Hebrew mindset, the image of moral unholiness and sin was often pictured in earthy terms using images of dirtiness in the physical realm. See, for example, Isaiah 25:10-12 taking careful note of the theme of justice and nearness of God in the immediately preceding verses. In the Old Testament, to be “ritually unclean” was to be placed “outside the camp” (away from the people of God) and disqualified from worship (away from the presence of God). Because James has just called on his readers to draw near to the presence of God, it makes sense that he now calls them to get rid of moral filth

which would hinder that. It's interesting to note that the Rabbis of early Judaism often used the metaphor of God Himself as a "purifying ritual bath".

Another important aspect of Hebrew thought in this context is that sin (moral uncleanness) was not merely an individual matter. It was not just between a person and God. The stain and the influence of sin spread beyond the individual and affected the whole community. As Elmer Martens has stated, "The fundamental unity in Hebrew thought is the group and not, as in the West, the individual. Modern man starts with the rights of the individual; the Israelite did not" (*God's Design* 67). This is readily apparent in the story of Achan in Joshua 7. Achan alone sinned but Israel as a community was punished because human existence is intended to be communal; we are our brother's keeper. The famous verse from Leviticus (quoted in James 2:8) says "love your neighbour as yourself". That verse should not be plucked from its context because Leviticus 19 as a whole gives insight as to how we go about doing that. Even a quick scan of the chapter reveals that we love our neighbour by living in godly community with him or her. This background amplifies the importance of earlier sections of James in relation to the verse we are now studying.

Far from being a random collection of moral advice, the letter is a carefully constructed argument in which each section builds on the ones preceding. Furthermore, it points to the conclusion that "submitting to God", "resisting the devil", and "drawing near to God" are not just private devotional acts. They are also acts of community. In that sense, the present passage anticipates what James is about to say in 5:13ff.



## Teaching Tips

➡ To provide adequate closure and guidance for the potentially sticky issues raised in question 5, you might provide a hand-out or verbal summary of conflict resolution principles. There is a handy summary available on-line at <http://www.gospel.com.net/rbc/ds/q0906/q0906.html>. Other possible resources include articles in journals such as *Leadership*. The Steinbach Bible College library also has available a tape series on church conflict. The tapes are presentations given by Dr. Terry Hiebert.

➡ To help with question 6, be ready with some examples or illustrations of issues where the church and the culture around us seem to be at odds. A good resource for articles and editorials on these issues is <http://www.breakpoint.org/> (click on “Transcripts”, “Chuck Colson’s page” or “summa nonsensica”).

➡ Consider choosing one of the questions below as “food for thought” for your class.

## Learning to Live

1. Responding to conflict with a simplistic black/white, right/wrong, victim/victimizer, my way/the highway approach is usually not very helpful. Not only that, it can reflect a misuse of power that produces the very things James warns about in this passage and in 3:1-12. Ponder the following alternative:

Skilful conflict mediators aid those locked in the death-grip of thesis/antithesis by aiding each party to

First, listen and fully focus on the other; and

Second, gain a fuller understanding not only of the reasons for the other’s position but, most importantly, of the presuppositions behind those reasons.

When this is done properly, the end of the process brings two results:

First, the revealed complexity of concerns on both sides often shatters the myth of black and white, thesis-antithesis that had devolved the issue into mere power struggle and

Second, ironically, this very complexity provides a rich tapestry of creative alternatives as to how the “conflict” - or seeming incompatibility of positions - can be resolved. The original precipitating conflict is sometimes shown to be hopelessly simplistic in its two-dimensionality. Resolving the conflict is now revealed to require the much harder work of addressing all the concerns represented in each disputant’s presuppositions.

In short, it can seem easier just to argue than to do the hard work of addressing everyone’s concerns one by one.

Check <http://www.next-wave.org/feb01/shields1.htm>.

2. For further information on the balance between correction and criticism see <http://www.caic.org.au/biblebase/criticis.htm>.
3. Prayerfully listen to the song “Worlds Apart” by Jars of Clay (on the CD entitled *Jars of Clay*). Examine what changes need to be made in your life.
4. Every day for a week, think and pray through the implications of the following paragraph for your life.

In our culture, it is continuously difficult to cultivate an everyday identity that derives from the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. No matter how many crosses we hang around our necks, paste on our bumpers and place in our churches, the radical life of repentance and baptism is mighty hard to sustain. But the Christian is a witness to a new reality that is entirely counter to our culture... What Jesus Himself proclaimed, and what we bear witness to, is the truth that the sin-soaked, self-centred world is doomed. (Peterson, Eugene. *The Unnecessary Pastor* 2).

## Lesson 9

# *Total Submission?*

## *James 4:12–18*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Judging*

James 4:11-12 contains a cluster of variations on the word “Judge” (Greek = *krino*). Because the Greek word behind the English “judge” can have a variety of meanings, and because “judge” often has negative connotations in English, it is helpful to consider the Jewish and early Christian understanding of “judging”.

Biblical Hebrew has three words which can accurately be translated “judge” but which have quite different shades of meaning. One of these words (*shapat*) means to judge in the sense of “ruling” (as in the book of Judges). A second word (*dyn*) can mean to judge in the sense of “punishing” or “obtaining justice”, and a third (*ryb*) can mean to judge in the sense of “quarrelling” or “initiating a lawsuit”. As we have seen, the concept of justice behind all of these words was not just adherence to an arbitrary standard of law, as it tends to be in the Western world. Justice was about adherence to the revealed will of God in the Torah and included a sense of loyalty to the peace and health of the community (*shalom*).

When you carry this background to the New Testament, it is not surprising that “judge” (*krino*) also has different shades of meaning, some positive and some negative.

It can mean “to approve”, “to distinguish one thing from another”, or even “to ponder, to consider carefully”. This wide variety of meaning within a word should not be foreign to us as it happens often in English. The word “criticism”, for example, is often used to reflect the meaning of “to condemn, to put down” (e.g. “I am sick of all this criticism from

my boss!”). This use of the word is not inaccurate, it just does not reflect the whole range of meaning because “criticism” can also carry a positive meaning such as “the act of considering carefully, “examining” or even “judging”.

This helps explain why the New Testament can say, on the one hand that we should judge (1 Corinthians 5:12-13, 1 John 4:1) but, on the other hand, we must not judge (Matthew 7:1-2, the present section of James). Different situations and intents bring out different nuances of the word. The following three points can serve as a guideline in regard to the whole idea of judging others (Nystrom 255):

- God has the right to judge. He is the Lawgiver and the Author of justice and righteousness (see James 5:9).
- God, at times, delegates this responsibility to the church. The problem is that we too often “judge” with the wrong spirit and in regards to the wrong issues. We are not to judge in accordance with our own preferences, the preferences of the world or even majority opinion. We are to judge according to the revealed word of God.
- We often judge inappropriately. We use slander and innuendo to put others below us or we use spiritual language to puff ourselves up to appear better than others or both. Clearly this is a violation of the Royal Law (James 2:8), an example of using the tongue against image bearers (3:9) as well as a failure to properly revere God as the ultimate Judge (5:9-10). Judging others inappropriately is a mark of foolishness, not a reflection of biblical wisdom. Consequently, the result will be something resembling James 4:1-6 rather than the fruit of James 3:17-18.



## Teaching Tips

➔ When discussing question 1, allow time for reflection and for specific examples to be cited. An example of global impact might be how the North American craving for fast foods leads to the rainforests being clear cut in order to make more grazing land for the beef required for export. Another one might be

how the Government of the United States (among other nations) has claimed to stand firmly for human rights and speaks out publicly against oppression yet continues to extend “Most favoured nation” trading status to China. More locally, perhaps the chasing after wealth has led to problems such as gambling addictions as the lure of the VLT (video lottery terminal) and it’s promise of instant riches has proven too hard to resist.

⇒ Question 4 requires some of the background information given above. A fun way to help the class understand how a Greek word in the Bible can carry different meanings and nuances is to have them brainstorm English words which carry different, even contradictory shades of meaning. See if the class can come up with 20 words. Here are some examples:

1. Cap = “to lie at the top of” (verb), or “to set a limit on” (verb), or “a tight fitting head covering” (noun)
2. Conviction = “a final judgement of guilty in a criminal case and the punishment that is imposed” (noun), or “an unshakable belief in something without need of further proof” (noun).
3. Lecture = “to rebuke severely or angrily” (verb) or “to deliver a public speech on a certain topic within your field of expertise” (verb).

⇒ For an interesting variation, have them brainstorm slang words which often put unusual or contradictory meanings to words (cool, bad, sweet, eh).



# Learning to Live

1. Every year the Human Development branch of the United Nations issues a ranking of the best and worst countries in which to live. The criteria for measuring the well being of nations include life expectancy, adult literacy, school enrolment, educational attainment, and per capita GDP “Gross Domestic Product” (by the way, Canada has finished first in this ranking seven times in a row). If you were asked to produce a tool that could measure the well being of a church, what would be your criteria for measuring?
2. For decades society chased mostly after wealth and/or financial security. An interesting recent development in our culture is that the younger generation is beginning to chase after things other than wealth. *Country Home* magazine asked it’s readers to choose their dream home\* out of the following list: a Beverly Hills mansion, a four bedroom Tudor home in the suburbs, a sleek designer apartment in Manhattan or a simple country farmhouse with a small acreage. Which do you think was the top choice? (See the bottom of the Works Cited page at the end of this guide for the answer). Hint: as of 1999 small towns in North America were growing at a rate of 4.9% per annum – twice the rate of cities. One reason cited was... the Post-modern generation definition of “success”. They define “success” as “being able to say ‘Good morning’ to the butcher, the mailman and the Fed Ex driver” (Sweet 123). We all realize the connection between chasing after money and idolatry. But is it possible to chase after a simpler lifestyle with a similar attitude of idolatry and independence from God? What is our younger society chasing after? How will they go about getting it, with God or without?

## Lesson 10

# *The Rich and the Poor*

## *James 5:1–6*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Now listen, you rich people*

James is changing his focus away from the merchant class addressed in the previous section to the elite class of landowners. In both cases he uses the relatively rare phrase “now listen” (4:13, 5:1). What makes this passage different, however, is the fact that he is not addressing a hypothetical situation as he did in 4:13. This situation is all too real so James launches into a prophetic warning against “the rich”. It is interesting, and perhaps a bit disturbing, to note that the phrase “the rich” is unqualified. He does not distinguish the good from the bad by saying say “some of the rich” or even “those of you who are rich but are also oppressing the poor”. He does not seem to allow for the possibility of a rich person who does not oppress the poor. “The Rich”, as a class of society, are guilty of oppression and no one seems to be off the hook.

#### *Weep and wail*

These terms refer to the loud verbal howl of grief by which the people of the Middle East respond to disaster. The image, unfortunately, should be familiar to us from scenes we have seen on the news whenever there has been a terrorist bombing or tragedy of another sort in Israel or the Arab countries. The terms are also common in the Old Testament prophetic books (Isaiah 15:2-3, Joel 1:5-12, Lamentations 1:1-2 etc).

In light of these passages, it is fantastic that James singles out the rich, the very ones who, according to the wisdom of the world should be on top and immune to wailing and destruction. Instead, James preaches a prophetic sermon denouncing them. His background text is Jeremiah 12:1-4.

### *Wealth, clothes, gold and silver*

These very things were the measuring sticks of status and importance in the Mediterranean world. Unlike the way in which we use the term, “wealth” did not refer to a person’s net worth or the sum total of all his possessions. In context, the term referred specifically to land ownership and production. Obviously rich land owners required labourers to increase the productivity so, then as now, the tendency was to pay as low a wage as possible and at the same time require more work and more production. This drive to increase the margin of profit at the expense of the well-being (*shalom*) of the workers was an affront to the God of Justice who defends the oppressed and powerless. As in Isaiah 5:9, the Lord Sabaoth (the God of the Armies) will go to war against the oppressors. The rich, therefore, will experience His wrath.

### *Self indulgence*

Where many of the sins mentioned so far in James are specific actions, this is a sin of omission, of failing to do anything at all in the face of human suffering. For James, as it was for the prophets, this amounts to a denial of both God and our common humanity. In other words, it is the very opposite of what Jesus called “the greatest commandments” and what James himself has called for in 2:8.

### *Fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter*

This phrase gives a very graphic image of some people gorging themselves to the point of sickness and obesity while other people, with whom the food could easily be shared, starve and die. Or, perhaps even worse, the verse gives the image of a group of marauding soldiers gorging themselves on the very food and drink of the people they have just slaughtered. There is some debate as to whether the term “day of slaughter” refers to the destruction of the rich themselves (which would be in keeping with many Old Testament texts) or whether it refers to the destruction caused by the selfishness of the rich. Adamson might be correct when he suggests this summary: “You rich have gratified the desires and lusts of your hearts like victors in a bloody battle, and you have not even had to fight in order to get your way. You have simply murdered the innocent man who did not even resist you.”



## Teaching Tips

✍ This is, obviously, a very touchy topic and teachers must handle it sensitively yet firmly. On the one hand, you may encounter resistance to the idea that we are, in comparison to the standards of most other countries, very rich. On the other hand, there may be concerns that if we veer too far into the areas of social concern we will lose the focus of the gospel. These are legitimate issues. Be sensitive to these issues but do not feel a need to soften the words of James. As we went through this passage as a class, even the “poorest” of the students was convicted by the words of this passage. The conviction was not to become a social revolutionary; rather it was to live a more balanced, godly life that reflected Kingdom priorities in regards to the use of wealth and possessions. Questions 1 and 2 are designed to try and isolate and address some of these legitimate concerns.

✍ Study the contexts of the Old Testament passages referred to in the student guide and in the section above.

✍ If you have access to a Bible background resource (e.g. Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* or Jeffers, James S. *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*), read the chapters which explain the financial and social structures which James would have been addressing.

✍ Consider choosing one of the questions below as “food for thought” for your class.

## Learning to Live

1. In 1963, a young Bob Dylan expressed the frustrations of his generation using language not unlike that of both the prophets and James: “Come you masters of war... you hide in your mansion as young people’s blood flows out of their bodies and into the mud... Let me ask you one question, is your money that good? Will it buy you forgiveness, do you think that it could? I think you

will find, when your death takes its toll, all the money you made will never buy back your soul" (*Masters of War*).

A generation later, Canadian singer Bruce Cockburn wrote a song about the gap between rich and poor in countries such as Nicaragua: "One day you'll rise from your habitual feast to find yourself staring down the throat of the beast they call a revolution". More recently, the rioting at the Summit of the Americas and the arson related burning of an MP's office because of the pay raise the Government had voted for themselves (June 6/01) reflect the ongoing anger of the poorer people who feel oppressed by the rich. What is a proper Christian response to all of this tension and anger? Where would you start and how?

2. Once, while eating lunch in a typical middle class restaurant in Southeastern Manitoba, I was challenged by an agnostic who angrily said "How can you possibly believe in a God of love and compassion if He allows people to starve to death in places like Ethiopia and Somalia? What has your 'God of love' ever done for the thousands of people starving in Somalia?" How do you think James might have answered? How would you answer? (see the bottom of the Works cited section at the end of this Leader's guide for my answer).
3. Affluence and poverty are spiritual issues. In his book *Mi\$\$ion\$ and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem*, former EMC minister Jon Bonk writes "We [Western Christians] try hard to believe. We have our prayer meetings... but the fact is our affluence and the security we have made for ourselves make God necessary only in an academic or theological sense. Prayer, as a Biblical study of the subject quickly reveals, is not the activity of people who feel that they have reasonable control of their lives. Prayer is the resort of weak, overwrought and desperate people..." Spend some time thinking this over.

Let it make you mad or convict you, but do not just dismiss it. If correct, what impact does this have on our spiritual lives – especially when you go on, as Bonk does, to connect this dynamic to the prayer text in James 5:13-15?

- 4) An on-line review of the movie *Magnolia* begins by saying that: "Our purpose as Christians is not just to provide food for thought, but to offer comfort to those who are broken and a challenge to

those who might help but have forgotten that the smallest grains of faith and love can make a difference.”

Then it ends with these challenging words:

“There is nothing more ugly than Christian complacency in the face of real human tragedy. And one of the reasons our world — filled as it is with the tragic characters who engage our imagination in this film — fails to find hope in the gospel is because we have made it clear that we agree with the assessment they have made of themselves. They are unlovable. Yet it should serve as a reminder to us all of what truly does matter in the rich scheme of things — of what genuinely makes any one of us different... But God. [Ephesians 2:4]” <http://www.antithesis.com/reviews/magnolia.html>

\*Note: We are not recommending that this movie be rented or viewed. We only intend to reinforce the message of James that human tragedy is a serious issue to God and, therefore, it must also be a tragedy for Christians.

5. Speaking of movies and wealth: In the year 2000 Blockbuster, the American video chain, showed an income of \$4.16 billion. \$7.98 million of this was made up from late fees alone. What do you make of these figures in light of what James says?

Is Neil Postman right that we are “amusing ourselves to death”? (*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Viking Press, 1986)

6. In commentaries there is some debate as to whether the “rich” addressed in this passage are inside the church and, therefore, fellow Christians, or whether they are actually outsiders (non-Christians). Which group do you think the passage is addressed to? Does this matter for how we interpret the text or how we live it out? Would we feel somewhat better if “the rich” in this passage were indeed non-Christians? Why?

## Lesson 11

# *Patience During Persecution*

## *James 5:7–11*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Be patient... until the Lord's coming*

There are few places where the differences between North American culture and ancient Mediterranean culture, are more apparent than the area of patience. We are trained from a very early age to expect quick results and quick relief. The North American economy, to a large extent, is built around and depends on this very conditioning. We do not expect to have to wait for gratification and we are genuinely surprised when we suffer. It is not surprising, therefore, that billions of dollars per year are spent on pain medication in North America alone. (On one expedition to Wal-Mart, I couldn't help but notice that even very young toddlers are being "trained up in the way culture thinks they should go". They were pushing shopping carts which were decorated with the slogan 'Wal-Mart shoppers in training'.) There is no use in pretending that we, as Christians, are not affected by this mentality. As the sign on my colleague's door says "If you want to know what water is don't ask the fish". In the same way, if you want to know how the mindset of North America has affected us (and our churches), we should ask someone from outside the culture. I do not trust myself very far when critiquing my own culture because my very absorption in it might blind me to things I need to see.

A Missions professor once told me that the questions North American Christians ask so often "Where is God when it hurts?" or "Why is God allowing me to suffer?" would not even make sense to Christians in Central America. The reason given was that North Americans have a sense of entitlement to an easy life and Central Americans do not. The Biblical mindset would be closer to the Central American one in this regard. As

noted in the student guide, the example of the farmer in James 5:7 serves two purposes: It makes clear that Christians, much like the farmer, will have to endure hard times when no ‘harvest’ is visible. There are many things in life beyond our control. On the other hand, they can be confident of the fact that the rains will come and the harvest will happen. In the same way, the patience to which we are called is much more than just a grim resignation that “what will be, will be and we can’t change it anyway”. We are not called to stoicism or fatalism. We are called to live godly lives, to patiently endure oppression and injustice without picking up our own weapons (whatever they may be). We are called to integrate our patience with the harmony and order that comes from wisdom.

### *Do not grumble against each other*

The paragraph above, when considered against the backdrop of the whole letter, helps to explain the command in 5:9. “Grumbling” would be considered a poor use of speech and, thus, a sin against the Royal Law as well as a mark of foolishness rather than wisdom. The phrase “against one another”, in context, suggests very strongly that the abusive and oppressive “rich” that James had just denounced were, in fact, not outsiders but fellow believers. James is saying that the oppressed must not use the weapon of their tongues against brothers and sisters in Christ no matter how justified they may feel in doing so. They are to leave that sort of judgement to the Judge whose judgement will begin with those of His own family (1 Peter 4:17).

### *You have heard of Job’s perseverance...*

The example of Job is an interesting choice in light of the command not to complain or grumble. As a reading of the book will quickly show, Job did not always seem to be a poster boy for patience. Not only that, he was known to complain bitterly (see, for example, Job 3:1-26, 6:8-13, 7:11-16, etc.). The fact is, however, that Job’s complaints arose exactly out of his relationship with God, they were not a questioning of his faith, much less an abandonment of it. Like a true child of Jacob/Israel, Job wrestled with God and as a result of his sufferings was led to a clearer picture of who God is and a much deeper and intimate relationship with God. It seems likely that James wants his readers, then and now, to have that same hope and goal in the middle of their current sufferings. Throughout the letter, James has been saying that the plan of the Lord in the life of each believer is that we “live a life of Christian virtue based on accurate teaching” (Nystrom 288). If we have chosen that direction for our lives, the suffer-



ing we endure may be used of God to produce mature Christians who are more dependent on God, less self-sufficient, more willing to serve others and who, paradoxically, live more peaceful and contented lives.



## Teaching Tips

⇒ Although the Life Response story does refer to a physical affliction, remember that James does not define suffering as we usually do. He is not primarily thinking of things such as physical pain or disease but of injustice, poverty, and malicious slander at the hands of those who profess to be brothers and sisters in Christ. The little girl in the story very likely suffered in more ways than just the physical. For instance, there were probably economic consequences for the family as a result of her condition and, in addition, she may well have been ridiculed and called names by her peers. At the very least, she would be unable to be fully integrated into the social peer groups of her community. At any rate, when discussing questions 1-5, do not allow your group to remain focused only on physical afflictions.

⇒ If there are farmers in your group, there have very likely been times when they have struggled to be as patient with the weather as the farmer in James' example seems to be. See if their experiences of frustration with things beyond their control can contribute to your discussion regarding "patience".

⇒ Jesus said "Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). Questions 6 and 7 should serve to illustrate that simple truth.

⇒ If time allows, try to focus in on questions 8 and 9. They raise central issues in understanding and living out the message of James and other sections of the New Testament.

⇒ Consider choosing one of the questions below as "food for thought" for your class.

# Learning to Live

1. Leonard Sweet makes a strong case that it is very inaccurate to say that North American culture is one of disbelief. A look at the shelves in Chapters reveals, fairly quickly, that this is a culture which believes a lot of things. There are books on Tarot, mind-reading, phrenology, channelling, Wicca, crystals, and sundry other “spiritual” things. In the United States, 70% of people believe strongly in ‘guardian angels’, 50% believe in UFOs, and 30% believe that the dead can and do communicate with us (see *Soulsunami* 407-431). In my observations, the central thread in all of this is a typically North American obsession with self. In the October 1999 issue of *Psychology Today*, Madonna said that she began studying a mystic branch of Judaism because she thought “it might give me the tools I need to make myself happy”. As we think through issues of patience, endurance, forgiveness and community, think seriously and honestly about the degree to which our understanding of Christianity is more in line with James than with Madonna.
2. Despite the fact that North Americans are wealthier than ever before, and that they claim to believe in prayer more than ever before, there is no denying that there are also more moral and emotional crises than ever before. During a broadcast of NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Dr. Laura Schlessinger laid at least part of the blame on the pastors and spiritual leaders.

She said “I think that the clergy have become more like camp counsellors than spiritual leaders. What they are doing is saying ‘I want the people to come back next week so I can’t challenge them too much. I can’t tell them religion demands something of them’, but God does demand something of you”. What do you think James might say to Dr. Laura? How would you want to respond to what she says?

3. Read the book *When God Interrupts* by Craig Barnes. Sample quote:

“We would rather objectify the poor into an ‘issue’. Then we can argue the politics or theologies of the Left and Right to find solutions to the ‘issues’. But if we discover that the poor have names

and faces and stories that will break our hearts, we have to do more than argue 'issues'. Then we have to evaluate our own lives as well... If our starting place for ministry is joyful gratitude for what God has done and is doing, and is going to do, we are less likely to take over as anxious substitutes for the Creator. People who have a God do not need to try and become one" (156-158).

## Lesson 12

# *A Community Not of This World*

## *James 5:12–20*

### Keep in Mind

#### *Above all brothers do not swear*

The words “above all” can carry the meaning of “most importantly” or “especially”. Given what James has been saying throughout the letter, however, and the urgency with which he has been saying it, it is unlikely that the phrase has that particular meaning here. It is more likely that we should understand “above all” to mean something along the lines of “finally” or “in conclusion”. It is for that reason that we have included verse 12 as part of the final section of the letter rather than having it as the last verse of the previous section (as in the NIV division). Although many have had trouble seeing how a word about oaths fits into the present context, it should be clear that it is simply another aspect of wisdom that James is addressing. To take an oath falsely would be a foolish and inappropriate use of the tongue – a theme that has surfaced now and again throughout the letter. It fits the present context in that James is about to go on to talk about prayer as an example of wise and appropriate speech. It is also possible that the poor and oppressed were given to taking hasty oaths of revenge against the oppressors mentioned in the initial verses of chapter 5. In that case, this command of James would be another call to patient waiting on the Lord rather than taking matters into your own hands (or mouth as the case may be!) and allowing your sinful nature to devise its own solution to the problem. At any rate, James is taking a prevalent Old Testament theme (Leviticus 19:12, Jeremiah 5:2, Hosea 4:2, Malachi 3:5), and using it to make a contrast between foolish speech (hasty oaths) and wise speech (patient prayer).

### *Is anyone in trouble? He should pray*

In times of trouble the first recourse should not be an oath of revenge but a prayer for help. It should be noted again that when James speaks of “trouble” here, he is not referring exclusively, or even primarily, to illness or disease. The Greek word behind this translation is, in fact, one very rarely used to refer to illness (Davids 191). The word is a broad one which refers to afflictions or trials of various kinds. In context, it is clear that one source of affliction was oppression at the hands of Christian brothers. Christians are to not resist an evil person (Matthew 5:39) but nonresistance does not mean indifference or a passive resignation to the situation. We are to take action but the action must not be the knee-jerk response of grumbling (5:9) and invoking an oath (5:12). The Christian responds with prayer. It is noteworthy that several themes (e.g. oaths, prayer, blessedness, the compassion of God) connect this section of James to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

### *Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise*

The reference is not to the superficial and short lived happiness which depends on circumstances (or even, in context, the short term satisfaction that may be gained by grumbling or invoking an oath!).

By “happiness”, James means something very close to the blessedness spoken of in 5:11. The believer, as shown in the example of Job, can have a deep-seated trust in God even when the circumstances of their lives are miserable or oppressive. This trust, in turn, brings a sense of thankfulness or “contentment of the heart” (Moo 175). None of this should be taken for granted; rather, God should be praised as the source and the reason for our contentment.

### *Is any one of you sick...*

The word translated “sick” in this passage is the same word Paul uses to describe his “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Corinthians 12 where the NIV chooses the translation “weaknesses”. The sense is that James is referring to weaknesses of the body - in particular to physical illness. The person in this situation is to call the elders of the church to pray over him. Because the calling of elders was not mentioned in 5:13a, it is likely that the situation in 5:14 is considered to be more extreme or urgent. The plural “elders” makes clear that this is a communal thing. James is not speaking of the concept of individual itinerant “faith healers” as we often see today.

He is speaking of the recognized leaders of the local church praying over a member of their believing community.

The idea of praying over someone for healing would not be a new thing for James' readers. The Rabbis of the time clearly taught that the people of God should "follow the attributes of the Holy One. As He visited the sick (Genesis 18:1), so should you visit the sick" (quoted in Adamson 197). A prayer for healing was also one of the blessings regularly recited in the synagogues.

James likely sees this act as a specific example of the general principle he gave in 1:27.

*Anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.*

In the ancient Mediterranean world, wounds were anointed with oil in order to cleanse them (e.g. the actions of the 'Good Samaritan' in Luke 10:34). It was also common to use oil to anoint those with internal pain, such as headaches, and even those who simply wanted to prevent illness in the first place (Keener 703. See, for example, Isaiah 1:6 and Mark 6:13). When appointing new leaders, such as Kings and Priests, it was also common to anoint them by pouring oil over their head (e.g. 1 Samuel 10:1, 16:13, Psalm 133. See also the poignant remarks of Jesus in Luke 7:44ff). Keener might well be correct when he suggests that the early Christians might have combined both of these aspects of anointing to symbolize that they were handing over the sick person to the power and authority of God for healing.

*The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up.*

The emphasis is on the "prayer offered in faith" (wise speech), not on the anointing. At the very least, this distinguishes the Christian approach from that of the pagan religions of the 1<sup>st</sup> C. They attributed magical powers to either the oil itself or to the ritual washings along with whatever charms and incantations were spoken. Faith was not a requirement for healing in the Greco-Roman mindset (see Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* 207-222).

Nonetheless, the passage is still a difficult one—especially for those who have seen people die after the elders have been called, the anointing done, and the prayer offered.

Some have tried to solve this problem by pointing out that, the Greek word for “made well” (*sozo*) is the same word used for “save”, and, therefore James is merely making the point that God will spiritually heal someone whether or not physical healing occurs. This, so the argument goes, fits in with the counsel to patience and the deliverance of the Lord earlier in chapter 5. The problem with this view, first of all, is that it distorts the present context where James is dealing with weaknesses of the body. Not only that, it distorts the meaning of the word translated “heal” in 5:16. This is a word used almost exclusively to refer to physical, not spiritual, healing. Finally, it seems to be an attempt to remove the difficulties from the text on the basis of predetermined conclusions.

According to Adamson (307-308), the key to solving the problems raised by 5:15 is to interpret it together with 5:16. There is an implication in both verses that sin *can* be linked to sickness. That should not distress us in and of itself because the same idea seems to be hinted at in places such as 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. We must, however, be very careful here. The connection should not automatically be made, nor should it be insisted on. The New Testament makes it quite clear that not all sickness or affliction is a result of sin (see, for example, the very clear text in John 9:1-3). Furthermore, the New Testament does not lead to the conclusion that God wishes to remove all sickness or physical weakness from the believer (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Therefore, what James seems to be saying is that those situations of illness which are caused by sin can be alleviated through public confession and prayer for healing.

In keeping with James’s emphasis on the community of believers, there does not seem to be a great distinction between the discerning prayer of the elders in verse 15 and that of the “others” in verse 16.

*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth...*

The recurring phrase “one of you” links this section to the previous one and shows that moral wandering (for James “truth” is not an abstract thing but a way of living) is also a symptom which requires the intervention and careful attention of the church. Failure to do so is a failure to love because, as James has already said so clearly, sin leads to death (1:15). The emphasis, as always, is on community. Sin is a personal issue but it is equally a corporate issue. To intervene with wisdom and love is to abort the unhealthy process described in 1:15. Thus, James ends with a call to the people of God to walk in the way of wisdom.



## Teaching Tips

⇒ Both the Life Response story and the first question capture the ending of James very well. When discussing this section, try to shift the focus away from individuals and towards the Body as a whole. What was, or will be, the effect of this situation on the Body if we do not attend to it as James suggests. Consider this in light of the metaphor used in James 1:15.

⇒ “Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22).

⇒ It would be good to conclude this lesson, and this whole set of studies, with a time of appropriate confession, prayer, restoration and forgiveness.

## Learning to Live

1. James says, “as an example, take the prophets” then gives us the example of Elijah. Take his advice. Carefully study the life and the writings of one of the prophets (Elijah and Jeremiah work particularly well for this exercise). Compare and contrast his reactions to life’s “troubles” or “afflictions” to your own.
2. Keep a journal to help you identify those areas in your life where you most lack the patience to endure and wait on God. At what point are you most tempted to “take matters into your own mouth (James 5:9, 12)”? Do you need a time of confession and restorative prayer?
3. Design a slogan for your church or your class, using both words and images, which summarizes the main message(s) of James.
4. Do some reading on the medical research of the past few years which links religious faith with good health. An article in *USA Today* began with these words, “Maybe doctors should write “Go to church weekly” on their prescription pads. Evidence is growing that religion can be good medicine”. Information is available at (<http://www.usatoday.com/life/health/lhs356.htm> ) or <http://www.christianitytoday.com> (or you can get the January 6 1997 issue of *Christianity Today* at the SBC library). What do you make of all this? Is this consistent with the message of James?



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## ENDNOTES:

### Lesson 9

\*The farmhouse was the choice of just over 50% of respondents.

### Lesson 10

Learning to Live exercise 2 = What I said was simply "Well, you seem pretty comfortable in here - eating a nice lunch... So what have you done lately for the people of Somalia?" This was not at all what he expected and he granted me the point.