

James: Living the Christian Life 24/7

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 1

Pain and Problems Are an Opportunity for Joy

God turns difficulties into blessings when we apply his Word.

Real faith has to deal with pain and problems. Spiritual maturity is about allowing our pain and problems to be used by God to create and build perseverance in us. James calls our pain and problems *trials*. That is a radically different take on pain and problems. *Trials* gives us a word picture that has its roots in how precious metals are purified and refined by fire. The point of trials is not to see whether we are guilty or innocent, pass or fail. The point is development and growth. This study will focus on how to let those trials refine us.

Lesson #1

Scripture:
James 1:2-12



PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

Right out of the gate in the Book of James, God hits us with a radical approach to trials: “consider trials an opportunity for joy.” What? Pain and problems are an opportunity for joy? That sounds way too Pollyannaish, doesn't it? That might even sound out of touch with reality. But James didn't say trials were an opportunity for happiness. He said they're opportunities for joy. Happiness comes from the same root word as *happen* or *happening*. Happiness is based on happenings. But James isn't talking about feeling good because things are going well. Happiness is okay, but it's ultimately shallow. Joy is deep-end-of-the-pool stuff. Joy means tranquility of the soul. Joy is a deep, underlying sense of wellbeing and meaning in life that is totally independent of whatever is happening—or not happening.

So trials are an opportunity for joy, because joy is based on a deep trust in God that nothing is happening to you that is more important than your relationship with God and his purposes in your life. James said, “... because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

That means followers of Christ can consider trials an opportunity for joy because they know God is going to use them to bring about perseverance. Perseverance means enduring or standing firm, not giving up or running away when the heat is on.

Think about the opposite of perseverance. To not persevere with God during trials means to lose faith in God in the face of pain. It's giving up on God and an opportunity for joy.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Share a personal story of something that happened in your past that seemed like a major trial at the time, but now you can look back and laugh or see a lesson you learned from it.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Joy and wisdom should be evident in our behavior.

Read James 1:2–8. In verse 2, James gave a bold command to consider our trials “an opportunity for joy.” The world around us wants to see how we react in the midst of life's toughest trials. They are not impressed by Christians who “put on a happy face” and pretend all is well.

[Q] What do you think is the difference between joy and happiness? How much of your happiness is tied to your circumstances?



New Thing

Leader's Note: Answers will vary, but lead them to the idea that happiness relates to a feeling and is based purely on circumstances. Joy, on the other hand, exists deeper in one's heart. It is not a fleeting feeling, but is based on the unmovable God and his promises. The Greek word for joy can also be translated "calm delight," which brings to mind a different picture than just being happy.

- [Q]** In verse 4, James said that perseverance must "finish its work." What do you think this means? When do you think this work will be finished in your life? What evidence do you see of Christ working in your character and decisions?

Leader's Note: One perspective is that God is always molding and renewing us to make us more like him. Philippians 1:6 says, "He will carry on this work in us until the day of completion," which likely means for the rest of our lives. That can give us hope and motivation to know that we'll never truly arrive, but that God can always shape us further.

- [Q]** In verses 5–6, James said to ask God for wisdom. What keeps us from asking God for wisdom or from truly believing he will answer when we do ask? What would help you to believe more?

Leader's Note: Common obstacles to believing God will answer are our past experiences with prayer, not knowing how to recognize when he is leading us, etc. Some things that can help strengthen our faith in this are more knowledge of God's Word, meditating more on the times that we have seen God answer prayer (as the Psalms are always talking about), learning to see God's hand at work, and gaining wisdom from wise Christian influences around us.

- [Q]** Share a time when you asked God for wisdom, direction, or discernment, in either a big or little decision, and you really felt that he answered clearly.

Teaching point two: Faithfulness and perseverance result in a crown of life.

Kevin Conrad shared this account in his sermon "Wisdom for Faithful Living Today" (SermonNotes.com):

In 1940, Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, as a haven for racial unity and cooperation. In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home.

In the midst of the raid, Jordan recognized the voice of a local newspaper reporter. The next day, the reporter showed up for a story about the arson while the rubble was still smoldering. He found Jordan in a field, planting seeds. He said to Jordan, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Jordan just kept planting and hoeing. The reporter continued his prodding, with no response from Jordan. Finally, the reporter said, "You've got two Ph.D.'s; you've put 14 years into this farm, and now there's nothing left. Just how successful do you think you've been?"



New Thing

With that statement, Jordan stopped hoeing. He said to the reporter, "You just don't get it, do you? You don't understand us Christians. What we are about is not success, but faithfulness."

Read James 1:9–12.

- [Q]** Besides developing perseverance, what are some other reasons God would allow us to go through trials?

Leader's Note: Making us able to comfort others and truly empathize since we've been through a similar trial (being blessed so we can be a blessing), pushing us to rely more on God and less on ourselves, re-ordering our priorities and refocusing our eternal perspective.

- [Q]** How can being in community help us through trials?

Leader's Note: God blessed us with the gift of community to help us through life's trials, yet too many of us still try to go it alone. Community can be a huge help—letting us know we're not the only ones who have gone through this, praying for us, providing for needs, and weeping and rejoicing with us.

- [Q]** According to verses 9–11, what should be our attitude about worldly success?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us redefine success.

Activity: Provide everyone in the group with a magazine. Ask half the group to find a picture of or article on someone who has achieved worldly success. Ask the other half to find a picture of or article on someone who has not achieved worldly success. Discuss how each person in the successful group might be missing the most important things in life. Consider how the unsuccessful might be able to have a better attitude toward what's truly important in life.

- [Q]** In verse 12, James said that we can receive the "crown of life" that God has promised. What do you think he was referring to?

Leader's Note: The crown of life in eternity may mean that we get to spend eternity with God, experiencing all the joy he has in store for us. On earth, it may mean that even in a life full of trials, we still experience victory, hope, and joy.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

In these first 12 verses, James gave us a new orientation for life. The following was published in *Kindred Spirit*, and exemplifies what James was talking about:



New Thing

Recently my wife and daughter and I were reading Psalm 37. When we came to the fourth verse, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart," I asked if this was true for me.

I am crippled by Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS, which is a progressive and fatal neurological illness. In the eight years I've had ALS, it's taken my voice and robbed me of the use of my limbs. It also forced us out of our lovely home.

Is the promise of fulfilled desires true for me and for the millions of other believers who have had their plans and dreams shattered? Yes, it's true—exceedingly so. I desire a healthy body, and Jesus promises me a body that is powerful, incorruptible, glorious, and spiritual. I desire a home that is beautiful and spacious, and he is preparing such a home for me in a city whose builder is God. I desire a world without crime, lies, or violence, and he promises me a world where righteousness dwells. I desire to be with those I love, and he promises that I will be caught up together with them forever. I desire an end to my sorrow, and he promises me fullness of joy in his presence.

I desire a heart so filled with love that there is no room for sin, and he promises to make me like Jesus when I am in heaven. I desire a ministry, and he promises I will serve him eternally. I desire a voice with which to praise him, and he promises I will sing before his throne.

Most of all, I desire to see him, and he promises I will always behold his face. He will keep his promise to give me the desires of my heart. (*Kindred Spirit*, Summer 2005 Vol. 29, No. 2)

- [Q]** Write down a few of your own questions for James 1:2–12. They can be questions about things you don't understand, or just a question you would like to discuss with your group.



New Thing

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 1

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That means followers of Christ can consider trials an opportunity for joy because they know God is going to use them to bring about perseverance. Perseverance means enduring or standing firm, not giving up or running away when the heat is on.

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Teaching point two: Faithfulness and perseverance result in a crown of life.

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NewThing

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 2

Dealing with Temptation

God wants to give us strength to resist.

Dealing with temptation is an everyday thing. We all regularly face the temptation to do things that are destructive and wrong. This study will help us learn to deal with our temptations by knowing when we are being tempted and by turning to God for help.

Lesson #2

Scripture:

James 1:13–18; 4:7–8

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

First James wrote about trials, than he wrote about temptations. In the original language, they are the same basic word. In many cases, the only way to know when it means *trial* and when it means *temptation* is to look at the context, and so we need to know the difference between trials and temptations.

Trials are things that happen to us. Temptations are experiences that present to us an opportunity to do something wrong, destructive, and ultimately evil. Many times a trial will include a temptation, but the temptation is not from God. Temptations come from our own evil desires and from the evil one, not from God. We should never associate temptations with God, because God is 100 percent good. He can allow or even send trials and tests, but never temptations. Knowing this is important because when we are tempted, it's not just a matter of choosing; it's choosing between good and evil.

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** Share a story from your childhood about being tempted to do something you knew was wrong, but you did it anyway. Did the consequences of your poor choices make you regret them? Why or why not?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God does not tempt me. The problem is my own sinful nature.

Temptations are custom made: "each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." The imagery is of dangling bait in front of a fish; it implies deception, because you catch a fish by making it think it's going to get to eat something good, but instead it's led to its destruction. We are tempted by our own junk, not anyone else's, and when we sin, we have to take responsibility and not blame our sinful choices on anybody but ourselves. We can't even pin our sin on the devil. The devil can tempt us, but he cannot make us sin, as we read in 1 Corinthians 10:13. When I sin, it's because I want something and am willing to do wrong to get it.

But James is not all negative. He is positive about the goodness of God. He wrote, "Don't be deceived, every good and perfect gift comes from God," and then says one of these gifts is God giving us a second birth. So our ability to deal with temptation has to do with being born again as followers of Christ. The power to resist temptation is not just willpower (though it does involve our will); it's power that comes from being reborn by God's Spirit who takes up residence inside of us.



New Thing

Read James 1:13–18, 4:7–8.

- [Q]** How can being in community help you fight temptations? How can it hurt and make it harder to resist temptations?

Leader's Note: *Community can help us fight temptations by holding us accountable in our weak areas, challenging us in love, and asking the tough questions. It can also help pick us up when we do fall into sin, and provides those who will pray for us, direct us to God's Word, and give wise counsel. The wrong kind of community can make it tougher to resist temptation, if they make decisions that "cause us to stumble."*

- [Q]** What role does God play in the temptations you face? What role does Satan (and demons) play in the temptations you face? What role do you play in the temptations you face?

Leader's Note: *All three play some part. Satan is the one ultimately responsible for tempting us, and he never stops. God never tempts us, as James says, but he does allow it at times (such as Jesus being led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted). But 1 Corinthians 10:13 says that God "always provides a way out of temptation so we can stand up under it." Our role is to choose God's way in the midst of temptations, which we can only do in God's power.*

- [Q]** What is usually the biggest help to you in resisting temptation?

Leader's Note: *Common answers are accountability partners, knowing and recalling certain Scriptures, and avoiding tempting situations as much as possible.*

- [Q]** Right after writing in-depth about temptation and sin, James wrote about God and all of his gifts (v. 17–18). Why do you think he chose to do this?

Leader's Note: *Perhaps James wanted to remind us that in the times we want to blame God for our temptations and sins, we should remember that God is always good and the giver of all good gifts.*

Teaching point two: We need to take sin and temptation seriously.

In his book *The Smell of Sin*, author Don Everts claims that in today's culture we don't take sin nearly as seriously as Jesus did. He refers to Jesus' shocking language about sin, which calls us to cut off our limbs, tear out our eyes, and avoid smelling like an old grave.

- [Q]** What do you think about our current "theology of sin" (claiming our sins aren't so bad in comparison with others)? What would be James's opinion of this?

Leader's Note: *We have many euphemisms today to lessen the impact when we're talking about sin. Sin is an extremely unpopular word today. The whole idea of moral absolutes is becoming less and less popular. So the world does not take sin seriously, and the church isn't doing much better. We need to continue to strive to find the balance between taking sin and its consequences seriously, while also always ending up in a place of God's grace and forgiveness.*



NewThing

Habitual sins can often be the most discouraging temptations to fight. There's a famous saying that goes: "Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny."

[Q] Do you think this is true? Why or why not? How might it apply to resisting these temptations? What habits do you think can help you resist temptation and say no to sin?

Leader's Note: *If this is true, then it is tougher up front to fight habitual sins, but once we do, we can truly create a new, healthy habit. Also we should not get discouraged every time we fall back into a habitual sin, but instead gauge our progress by how we have improved, such as going longer without sinning.*

Optional Activity

Purpose: *To help us realize how we trivialize our sin.*

Activity: *Ask the group to call out any sin they can think of. These should include overt sins such as murder and lying, and hidden sins such as pride and jealousy. Write down everything the group mentions on a whiteboard or poster board. Then ask the group to decide which sins they think are the worst. Put a star by those. When they are finished, ask them how they think God ranks these sins. Explain that the smallest sin is as bad as the most serious sin to God. For example he considers gossip as evil as murder. The consequences may not be as severe, but the sin itself is anathema to his holiness.*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

In the Star Wars movie *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin Skywalker is constantly tempted to give in to the dark side of the force. Different forms of temptation are used to manipulate him, much as Satan does to us—causing doubt, justifying revenge, building pride, and appealing to a seemingly noble cause. As always, choosing to sin (giving in to the dark side) feels worth it at the time, but notice where Anakin ends up—alone, mangled, scarred, crawling through dirt in the midst of a volcano. What a shockingly accurate picture of how sin ultimately leaves us.

[Q] Why is sin so appealing? What is at the root of most of our sins?

Action Point: Break into pairs. Ask your partner to pray for an area of temptation that you need strength in overcoming.



NewThing

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Lesson #2

Scripture:

James 1:13–18; 4:7–8

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God does not tempt me. The problem is my own sinful nature.

Teaching point two: We need to take sin and temptation seriously.

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NewThing

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 3

True Faith Leads to Change

Faith without works is dead.

Real faith means real obedience. Lots of people consider themselves spiritual, but not nearly as many approach God's Word with a commitment to obedience. Many have "faith without works." In other words, they believe things about God but are not changed by what they believe. This study will help us move toward a changed life.

Lesson #3

Scripture:

James 1:21–25; 2:14–26

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

The Book of James tells us to be people who obey God instead of just listening to what he says and agreeing with him. This is completely basic, yet absolutely challenging: to be doers of what God says and not just hearers.

Think about how popular and socially acceptable it is to be a person of faith. Just about everybody says they are spiritual, and a vast majority even claim to have committed their lives to Christ. But for most people this is about what you believe concerning spiritual things, not how you actually live your life. The research is pretty grim: people who consider themselves Christians aren't noticeably different in their actions than people who don't.

George Barna's book *The Second Coming of the Church* gives some dismal research stats, showing that Christians are not different from non-Christians when it comes to things like divorce and giving to charity. He concludes, "We think and behave no differently from anyone else." Christians are not defined by their actions in our society, and this is tragic.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Share a time when you met someone who said they believed something strongly, but their actions didn't match up. How did that make you feel?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God expects us to act on what we know.

Think how many people go to church, week in, week out, and listen to all the messages about what God commands us to do: feed the poor, be sexually pure, treat others with respect and love, and give generously to God and others, to name a few. We have a tendency to hear such admonitions and say, "Good message; I really needed that," and then go home and not change anything.

Read James 1:21–25.

[Q] "Actions speak louder than words" can be one way of summing up what James is trying to communicate. When have you seen that to be true?

[Q] If obeying God doesn't earn our salvation, then why obey? Are there really any consequences to disobeying God?



New Thing

Leader's Note: *There are many reasons to obey. We still have to face the consequences of our sins, even amidst God's grace and forgiveness. It damages our relationship on earth with God and can keep us from closer communion with him. Our actions affect the lives of those around us and our witness for God's kingdom. Ultimately, if we truly love God, then we trust he knows what's best for us, and we want to obey him.*

[Q] Why might people be tempted to seek after deeper or hidden truths rather than simply obeying what they already know?

Leader's Note: *It's much easier to add to our head knowledge than to be constantly challenged to change how we're living. Just look at the Pharisees. Unapplied head knowledge adds to our pride. Humble obedience hurts it.*

Teaching point two: Obedience takes humility, and the realization that my soul is in danger.

James not only told us to act on what we know, but he said that if your faith (your relationship with God) is not something that results in changed actions, then your faith is dead. He added, "Don't give yourself any credit for what you believe about God, because even demons believe in God," and then to top it all off, he wrote, "When will you ever learn that faith that does not result in good deeds is useless?"

Very simple, very in your face. Obedience takes humility (letting God be in charge of my life) and the realization that my soul is in danger. Obedience isn't about performance or being more acceptable to God through improved behavior. Obedience is about maturity, integrity, and growth in a life-transforming relationship with God.

Read James 2:14–26.

[Q] What example is mentioned in verses 15–16 that challenges the idea of a faith that isn't backed by actions? Why is that kind of faith worthless? Why would such a faith be a danger to my soul?

Leader's Note: *The example is of good wishes rather than actions. This is not really faith at all, but shirking our responsibility. If I have no desire to put feet to my faith, I need to question my faith.*

[Q] You can try as hard as you want to play a new sport you've never played before, but it's impossible if you don't know the rules. You can't obey what you don't know. How have some of the "rules" in the Bible helped you make better decisions? Give examples.

Leader's Note: *We must study and know God's Word. He gives us direction through the Bible, wise teachers, counselors, circumstances, and the Holy Spirit.*

[Q] What most motivates you to obey God's Word?

Leader's Note: *Answers may include: fear of consequences, desire to please others, desire to meet your own expectations, feelings of success. It can be important to figure out what motivates you, so that you can become more obedient to God.*



NewThing

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us see how to become doers of the Word rather than just hearers.

Activity: Read the following case studies and determine how each person could become a doer instead of a hearer.

- *Randy has been going to church for years, but he has never volunteered for anything.*
- *Corinne has memorized 1400 Scripture verses. Many around her hear her quote these.*
- *Marjorie complains about the plight of the homeless all the time. She has a homeless shelter in her town, but she has never been there.*
- *Andy regularly marches in protests for social justice, but he doesn't have a single friend who is not in his income bracket.*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Focus on the Family Magazine carried this story about one who is a “doer of the Word”:

Truett Cathy has answered the question “What would Jesus do?” The founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants is a successful businessman, but for many, he is even better known—and respected—for letting his faith guide his business operation. Here are a few examples:

Mr. Cathy's restaurants have been closed on Sundays since 1948. The 79-year-old CEO of the nearly 1,000 Chick-fil-A restaurants doesn't mind losing millions of dollars of business to honor the Lord's day.

At his first restaurant in 1948, he hired Eddie J. White, a 12-year-old African American. This was an unpopular choice during a time of segregation. He also mentored an orphan, Woody Faulk, since he was 13. Today Woody is vice president of product development at Chick-fil-A.

Cathy developed a successful foster home system called WinShape Homes. There are now 11 homes in the U.S. and one in Brazil. His daughter Trudy and son-in-law John were Southern Baptist missionaries at the Brazil home for ten years. His Camp WinShape and the WinShape Foundation provide scholarships for kids and college students.

One of his favorite truisms is “It's easier to build boys and girls than to mend men and women.” Chick-fil-A Kids meals don't come with promotional toys from the latest popular movie. Instead he offers Veggie-Tales books, audiocassettes of *Focus on the Family's* “Adventures in Odyssey,” and other character-building materials.



New Thing

Woody Faulk gives a good summary of Cathy's character: "A lot of people look on Truett as Santa Claus, but he's not. He'll meet you halfway so that you can learn a lesson from the process. He's the personification of James 1:22: 'Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.' I sincerely owe my life to that man." (Tom Neven, "A Doer of the Word," *Focus on the Family Magazine*, September 2000)

[Q] Now that you've done this study, what will you do differently this week to be a "doer" and not just a "hearer"? Be specific so you can track whether you were successful in your "doing."

Action Point: Ask the group to pray for you to carry out this specific thing. Revisit it next week to see how you did.



NewThing

JAMES:
LIVING THE
Christian Life
24/7

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 3

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Teaching point two: Obedience takes humility, and the realization that my soul is in danger.

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At his first restaurant in 1948, he hired Eddie J. White, a 12-year-old African American. This was an unpopular choice during a time of segregation. He also mentored an orphan, Woody Faulk, since he was 13. Today Woody is vice president of product development at Chick-fil-A.



NewThing

Cathy developed a successful foster home system called WinShape Homes. There are now 11 homes in the U.S. and one in Brazil. His daughter Trudy and son-in-law John were Southern Baptist missionaries at the Brazil home for ten years. His Camp WinShape and the WinShape Foundation provide scholarships for kids and college students.

One of his favorite truisms is "It's easier to build boys and girls than to mend men and women." Chick-fil-A Kids meals don't come with promotional toys from the latest popular movie. Instead he offers Veggie-Tales books, audiocassettes of Focus on the Family's "Adventures in Odyssey," and other character-building materials.

Woody Faulk gives a good summary of Cathy's character: "A lot of people look on Truett as Santa Claus, but he's not. He'll meet you halfway so that you can learn a lesson from the process. He's the personification of James 1:22: 'Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.' I sincerely owe my life to that man." (Tom Neven, "A Doer of the Word," Focus on the Family Magazine, September 2000)



New Thing

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 4

True Faith Leads to Social Action

Real faith means compassion and action for the poor.

One of the effects of the pervasiveness of media is that there is not a person alive in our country who is not aware to some extent of the plight of the poor, both in the U.S. and abroad. We can live in our comfortable, middle class worlds where we don't often see poor people, but it's impossible to insulate ourselves from the reality that the world is full of the poor.

The question the Book of James raises is simple: what are you going to do about the problems of the poor? This study will challenge us to think about how God is calling us to respond to the needs of the poor as part of our faith.

Lesson #4

Scripture:

James 2:1-9; 5:1-6

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the "Participant's Guide" included at the end of this study.

Two kinds of social justice/injustice are talked about in the Book of James.

The first type mentioned is that the poor people in the church were neglected in favor of the rich people. They were mistreated and discriminated against by the practice of giving special honor to rich people. So this type ignored social justice by showing favoritism toward the rich. Though we don't have the same problem of giving rich people preferential treatment, we do have the tendency to judge people based on how much money they make, and have a higher opinion of a wealthy person compared to a poor person. We are much more subtle in showing favoritism to the rich over the poor.

The second type is in the fifth chapter of James. Those who were wealthy were reminded that their wealth and lifestyle had come at the expense of the poor. We can tell ourselves this is not true today, but it's still quite often the case. Michael Jordan got bad press for his association with Nike, because the shoes that Nike were selling for upwards of \$100 were being made by people (including children) who were being paid pennies an hour and working in horrific conditions in the sweatshops of Asia. MJ got bad press for that, but I doubt many of us stopped buying Nikes or bothered to find out if the nice things we rely on are produced at the expense of poor people who barely make enough to live.

Social justice, the responsibility of the haves to care for the have-nots, is just as much an issue today as it was in the day when the Book of James was written.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Share a time when you served the poor (mission trip, soup kitchen, house building, helping a neighbor in hard times, etc.). How did the experience affect you?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Do not show favoritism.

James made it clear that we are to consider the poor our neighbors. We are to love and care for them as we love and care for ourselves. He emphasized this point by calling it the "the royal command." Read James 2:1-9.

[Q] James strongly warned against favoritism in these verses. Obviously his dinner example doesn't apply as much in today's culture, but do you see favoritism practiced in our society? If so, where? Do you struggle with it yourself?



NewThing

Leader's Note: *Favoritism is still alive and well in today's society—our obsession with celebrities, our value on appearance, our respect for those with more money and higher career positions. Even certain personality types are favored.*

The opposite of favoritism might be discrimination. This can be seen in churches and is not just based on race or gender. How much money someone gives to the church, what role they serve in, or how they dress on Sunday morning can cause us to discriminate against certain people in our church body.

[Q] Where do you see favoritism among church members? Do you struggle with this? How can we overcome it?

Leader's Note: *This is common in today's churches. To overcome it, we need to work constantly on seeing people as God does. This is not easy, but we need to examine the true motives behind why we're discriminating against someone—is it just because they make different choices than us on things that aren't important (like clothes or music)? Is it because we don't mesh well with their personality type? Will we meet people like them in heaven?*

Teaching point two: Beware the dangers of wealth and look for ways to serve the poor.

The magazine *Suburban Focus* says "you're so suburban" if:

Your lawn mower is more powerful than your first car.
Your kids have never crossed the street at a stoplight.
You have the luxury of a two-car garage, but the cars don't fit in it. —Cathy Polacek
You built a shed to house your Christmas decorations. —Cathy Polacek
Your commute is twice as long as what you tell people it is. —Harriet Russo
You pick your dog's haircut out of a magazine. —Jessica Cadwalleader
You drive your van a block to get milk.
You always return your grocery cart to the cart rack.
You have no idea if your town has a public bus service.
Your most recent night out was a parent/teacher conference.
You sometimes refer to summer as "garage sale season." —Angela Ferina
Your mortgage could balance the national debt in a third-world country.
You have ADT, a rottweiler, and motion-detector lights, but no curtains on your window.
You jog five miles a day but spend 30 minutes waiting for a closer parking space at the mall.
("You're So Suburban If..." *Suburban Focus*, April 2002, pp. 6–8, 15, 26, 28)

We laugh at this, but if we identify with it too closely, we should be trembling. Read James 5:1–6.

[Q] What are some common barriers that keep us from giving our time and resources to help people in need?



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Leader's Note: Common barriers are ignorance to real needs, selfishness, the feeling that we won't make a difference, the feeling that we are in need ourselves and can't afford to give anything, too busy, etc.

[Q] What can we do to make ourselves more aware of those in need?

Leader's Note: We can take time to be more in touch with the world, whether that's following the news more closely, taking more walks through downtown, or visiting shelters.

[Q] What can we do to raise our children with a healthy view of material possessions?

Leader's Note: We can help our children be aware of the needs that exist, while also seeing that God calls us to reach out to those in need and helps us to do so.

[Q] What message does an externally focused church send to those far from God?

Leader's Note: This is exactly what Jesus did—healing people's needs and then telling them of God's love. People need to know God cares about them in their current situation, and that he will provide for them both here on earth and in eternity. Many people are converted to community before they are converted to Christ.

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us see how completely we become addicted to wealth.

Activity: Provide each person in your group with a magazine that contains lots of ads. Ask them to pick out at least one item in that magazine that they would like to have. Ask them to estimate what they think that item would cost. Ask them if that would be the wisest way to use that money, or if there's another way that money could honor God.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

The movie *Pay It Forward* illustrates how life changing it becomes when people seriously take on the challenge of reaching out and helping others in need. In this movie, everyone is shocked when a boy tries to convince them to get out and help people. What an accurate picture of our society's mindset, and what a great picture of the rippling effects of changed lives that can result from just one act of service from us towards someone in need.

The biggest mistake we make in looking at the needs around us is to get overwhelmed. Pick one place to start and one person to help.

[Q] In what ways can your church, small group, and family serve and care for the poor in your community?

Action Point: Brainstorm ways to answer the above question. Put together some concrete plans for something the group can do together.



NewThing

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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 4

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Lesson #4

Scripture:

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PART 1

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The first type mentioned is that the poor people in the church were neglected in favor of the rich people. They were mistreated and discriminated against by the practice of giving special honor to rich people. So this type ignored social justice by showing favoritism toward the rich. Though we don't have the same problem of giving rich people preferential treatment, we do have the tendency to judge people based on how much money they make, and have a higher opinion of a wealthy person compared to a poor person. We are much more subtle in showing favoritism to the rich over the poor.

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Do not show favoritism.

Teaching point two: Beware the dangers of wealth and look for ways to serve the poor.



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PART 3

Apply Your Findings

The movie *Pay It Forward* illustrates how life changing it becomes when people seriously take on the challenge of reaching out and helping others in need. In this movie, everyone is shocked when a boy tries to convince them to get out and help people. What an accurate picture of our society's mindset, and what a great picture of the rippling effects of changed lives that can result from just one act of service from us towards someone in need.

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NewThing

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 5

Taming Our Tongues

Real faith changes the way we speak.

Real faith means change in how we talk to and about people. Almost everyone struggles with saying hurtful, harmful, or just plain wrong things. Nothing is harder to control and bring into obedience to God than our words. This study will give us some tools to begin bringing this unruly member of our bodies under control.

Lesson #5

Scripture:

James 1:19–20, 26; 3:2–12

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

In James, God challenged us to talk in ways that reflect a relationship with him. Who doesn't need to hear this? We all have injured other people and hurt ourselves repeatedly by the things we have said. We've spoken words that are harsh, stupid, untrue, mean, or unwise, and for most of us, this is not every now and then but a regular thing. Think about all the ways we can sin with the tongue: insults, lies, gossip, slander, harshness, profanity, and vulgarity, to name a few. This study will examine four things to consider when it comes to our words.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] Share a time when you felt your words encouraged, empowered, motivated, or comforted somebody.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Becoming a person with a "tamed tongue" is a huge win.

Read James 3:2–8. As negative as this passage sounds, James started with a motivating promise: of all the things that we struggle with, nothing is harder than controlling your tongue, but if you can get your tongue under control, you can deal with just about anything. God encouraged us that if we learn to follow him in our speech, we can learn to follow him and control ourselves in anything. Our faith becomes real and our talk is reigned in when we see what's at stake: learning self-control in all things can come from learning self-control in how we talk.

- [Q] James used multiple metaphors to describe the power of the tongue. Share a metaphor or comparison that comes to your mind when you think about the power of words to both cause great damage and bring great encouragement.

Leader's Note: *Answers will vary, but there are many things that can be used for both good and evil. This is because everything God created for our good, Satan distorts and tries to use for evil. Even basic things like food and sex are part of God's perfect creation but have been severely distorted by Satan.*

- [Q] Consider today's clichés that seem to contradict what James said about the tongue: "Talk is cheap," or "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." Do you agree with these? Can you think of some other clichés? How do they relate to what James said?



NewThing

Leader's Note: *These clichés aren't true—words do hurt. James had it right. Look at how many people today are still recovering from painful words from their childhood (or the things that weren't said but needed to be, like expressions of love).*

Teaching point two: Don't underestimate the power of what you say.

James used graphic images to remind us that the struggle we have with our tongues or speech is no small thing. The tongue is like a horse's bit: a five-inch piece of metal on a harness can guide a thousand pound animal. It's like the rudder of a ship: a few feet of steel can steer a vessel hundreds of feet long. A huge forest can be burned to ashes by the strike of a single match. A small snake can still kill you if it's poisonous enough.

[Q] It is often said that it takes ten encouraging comments to make up for just one negative comment. Why do you think negative words stick with us so much longer, while we hesitate to believe positive words?

Leader's Note: *Satan loves to remind us of the negative things and make us doubt the positive ones. This is where we need to meditate on the truths surrounding how and why God created us, how he made us in his image, and how he loves us as we are.*

[Q] Honoring God with our speech not only refers to the words we say, but also the words we shouldn't say, such as gossip and slander. In what ways have you seen the painful effects of these damaging kinds of speech?

Leader's Note: *We can avoid gossip (even in sharing prayer requests), complaining (which is showing discontent with where God has put us), and prideful boasting.*

Optional Activity

Purpose: *To help us see the power of words.*

Activity: *Find several songs that convey different moods with their words. For example, a heavy metal or rap song may have angry, cutting words. A love song may have affirming, encouraging words. Gather three or four of these and read them to your group. Discuss how the different words made them feel. Ask them how they would respond if someone were actually saying those words to them.*

Teaching point three: Don't be a walking, talking contradiction.

Read James 3:9–12. James reminded us of the ultimate tragedy, of how out of the same mouth come words that praise God and words that curse someone that God loves and made in his image. The message is: You don't want to be a walking contradiction, a hypocrite. You don't want to be a person who talks out of both sides of their mouth, one godly and the other sinful.

[Q] Have you seen someone destroy their Christian message by the way they spoke to others?

[Q] Read Colossians 4:6. What do you think Paul meant when he said our conversation should be full of grace and seasoned with salt?



NewThing

Leader's Note: *Salt causes thirst, so he could mean that our conversations should make people thirsty for God. It also adds flavor to food, so he could mean that our words should be useful, valuable, and add flavor to life. Salt was used as a preservative, so our words should help preserve life and God's values.*

Teaching point four: The path to better speech is to make listening your goal instead of talking.

There's a famous quote that says, "the opposite of listening is not talking; the opposite of listening is waiting to speak." There's something about us that loves to get our two-cents-worth in on everything. But God challenged us to be people who are quicker to listen than we are to speak. Read James 1:19–20, 26.

Our focus in relationships should be on listening, not on waiting our turn to say whatever it is we feel like saying.

[Q] James called us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." Why is this so hard for most of us? In what ways do you struggle with your words?

Leader's Note: *This comes down to pride—we want our thoughts to be heard. When people do things we don't like, it's much easier to get angry than extend them grace. There is no easy answer to how to live more like James described. Part of it is discipline—teaching ourselves to actively listen to people rather than formulate our response as they talk. Ultimately it takes reliance on God's power to do this.*

[Q] Today's culture often encourages us to say whatever it is we're feeling without considering the damage it could do: "Somebody had to say it." "It'll be good to get it off your chest." "You should give them a piece of your mind." How would you respond to that in light of what James said?

Leader's Note: *Culture is wrong. As Proverbs repeats time and time again, the wise man is much more careful with his words than the fool. There are many times when something shouldn't be said, and when it should be said, it should be said in a much different attitude.*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Not controlling our speech means our faith is empty, worthless, and a sham. No one can say, "Oh, I just have trouble controlling my mouth." James said that if I have trouble controlling my tongue, then everything else about me spiritually is a mockery. That's what is at stake.

[Q] What can you do this week to improve your speech so God can use your words for good?



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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 5
Taming Our Tongues
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Lesson #5

Scripture:

James 1:19–20, 26; 3:2–12

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

In James, God challenged us to talk in ways that reflect a relationship with him. Who doesn't need to hear this? We all have injured other people and hurt ourselves repeatedly by the things we have said. We've spoken words that are harsh, stupid, untrue, mean, or unwise, and for most of us, this is not every now and then but a regular thing. Think about all the ways we can sin with the tongue: insults, lies, gossip, slander, harshness, profanity, and vulgarity, to name a few. This study will examine four things to consider when it comes to our words.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Becoming a person with a "tamed tongue" is a huge win.

Teaching point two: Don't underestimate the power of what you say.

Teaching point three: Don't be a walking, talking contradiction.

Teaching point four: The path to better speech is to make listening your goal instead of talking.



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PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Not controlling our speech means our faith is empty, worthless, and a sham. No one can say, "Oh, I just have trouble controlling my mouth." James said that if I have trouble controlling my tongue, then everything else about me spiritually is a mockery. That's what is at stake.



NewThing

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 6

Becoming a Praying People

Real faith drives me to talk to God.

Followers of Christ are called to be people who pray bold prayers as a regular part of their lives. God can do enormous things through the simple thing called prayer. Prayer is an everyday thing, not just something you do if you're religious. Prayer is the means to know and obey God, and has far more potential than we often realize or utilize. This study will look at what James said about prayer.

Lesson #6

Scripture:
James 4:2; 5:13–17

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

Almost everyone prays. Even those who profess no interest in spiritual things pray for things they worry about. But for the Christian, prayer is our connection with God. It's a way to gain his thoughts, direction, and victory in our lives. James gave two particular examples of prayer: praying for sickness and praying for forgiveness and relief from guilt and shame.

It's not entirely clear if he was talking about two different scenarios with sickness and guilt, or whether guilt was a subset of sickness in general. James said to pray in several ways about our troubles: on our own, with church leaders (*elders* isn't limited to people with the official title but includes mature, recognized leaders of the church), and with each other in general. But the most startling thing James said is at the end—that any follower of Christ has the power to pray so that entire weather systems can be changed for years and years. That's how much power God has invested in prayer.

Do we think like that? Sure we say we *believe* that prayer can change anything, but do we *pray* as if prayer can change anything? Yes, we pray fervently when we or someone we love is sick, but prayers that have the power to effect change in us and in others are meant to be a part of following Christ 24/7.

Discussion starters:

[Q] What is one of the biggest answers to prayer God has granted you?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Pray with others.

Read James 4:2 and 5:13–17. When troubles are particularly vexing, pray with leaders or other respected people from your church. No matter what you are facing, pray with other believers. Don't worry about having eloquent words; simply support each other in prayer. Prayer is a team sport.

[Q] One popular model for prayer is A.C.T.S.: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (asking). Which of these do you practice the most when you pray alone? With other people? Which do you practice the least? How might a balance of these four things change the way you feel about praying alone and with others?

Leader's Note: *Many of us are weak on adoration, mostly because we don't know how. Singing praise songs, reading Psalms, or just focusing on God's characteristics can help us do this more. Doing this on our own and with others brings joy to our prayer*



NewThing

times rather than an endless list of needs. It also helps us to understand God's goodness and power, changing the way we pray.

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help you learn how to pray according to the A.C.T.S. model.

Activity: As a group, spend some time in adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Use the first three verses of Psalm 18 to help you begin with adoration, then move to confession, either silently or aloud, then thank God for ways he has been good to you this week, then finally pray for each other.

[Q] If you read the prayers in the Book of Psalms, you won't see the above model—just honest, deeply felt emotion being poured out to God, whether it was joy, anger, confusion, doubt, or victory. How freely do you express your true emotions and thoughts to God? Why do we so often hold back from him how we truly feel? Can God work in our situations if we are not honest with him?

Leader's Note: *Pride is often a reason for holding back, which is silly since God knows us even better than we know ourselves. We also must remember that he can take whatever it is we need to dish out. He won't be offended; in fact, he wants our honesty for our own sakes.*

Teaching point two: Pray big prayers on a regular basis.

J.B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God Is Too Small*. If James had written a book on prayer, he might have titled it, *Your Prayers Are Too Small*. Pray for yourself, your family, friends, neighborhood, community, country, and world. Pray big. We have no guarantee of big outcomes, but we do have a guarantee that a big God is listening.

There are several Greek words for our English word *ask* that are used in the New Testament: one means to question, one means to request as a favor, and one means to search for something hidden. But the version of *ask* that James used in these verses can be translated "beg, call for, crave, desire, require, and demand."

[Q] Using the types of asking listed in the paragraph above, which type of asking do you typically use in your prayers?

[Q] James said, "The prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective." Have you found your prayers to be powerful and effective? Why or why not? What would it take to make them so?

Leader's Note: *Knowing God's many promises in his Word, meditating more often on the times he has answered prayers, and hearing more stories of his faithfulness to others can increase our faith to pray this way.*

[Q] Since God can do whatever he wants, and since he always knows what we're thinking and feeling, then why do you think prayer is so important to him?



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Leader's Note: *When you love someone deeply, you want them to communicate with you as often and as honestly as possible. So it is with God. Why wouldn't he want to hear from his children? Plus, prayer increases our knowledge of him and our faith in him. It is the only way we can truly get to know God personally.*

[Q] James called us to pray big prayers—prayers that take a lot of faith. Do you feel as though you pray big enough? What are some big prayers that you hesitate to pray? What would it take for you to start offering those prayers to God?

Leader's Note: *We rarely pray big enough, but God loves to answer huge prayers. Then we can truly give him the glory and increase our faith, because we get to see God do things that only he can do.*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Marti Pieper shared this story on PreachingToday.com:

In his book *Beyond Jabez*, Bruce Wilkinson shares the story of an old African woman who demonstrated faith in God's power to provide. Although she lived in a tiny mud hut, she had taken on the responsibility of caring for 56 orphans.

A small group of Wilkinson's "Dream for Africa" volunteers had arrived in this grandmother's native Swaziland to plant gardens. On the final day of their visit, they came upon her tiny home, surrounded by the many children in her care. A number of little gardens had been dug up all around the hut, but oddly, no plants were growing in any of them.

The volunteers learned that, earlier on the same day, the woman had told the children to dig lots of gardens. When the children asked her why—since they had neither seeds nor money—she responded, "Last night I asked God to send someone to plant gardens for us. We must be ready for them when they come."

Wilkinson's volunteers had come with hundreds of ready-to-plant seedlings. God sent them to the very place where one of his servants had begged for his intervening hand. The faithful grandmother and her children were ready when the answer came.

(Bruce Wilkinson with Brian Smith, *Beyond Jabez*, Multnomah, 2005, pp. 147–148)

Action Point: Break into pairs and tell your partner one big thing you'd like to pray for. Spend a few minutes praying together.



NewThing

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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 6

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Lesson #6

Scripture:

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NewThing

