



James

James teaches us what it means to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Goal for the Session

Participants should leave the session with a firm understanding of several key themes in James: friendship with God, the gift of divine wisdom, personal and spiritual integrity, and steadfast devotion even in times of trial.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the Epistle of James (only 108 verses), then read through the Participant Handout, highlighting the points you want to emphasize when you lead the session and noting any questions you have or that you think the participants will want to discuss. If you have access to a good study Bible, read the introduction and footnotes for James. (For a recommendation of a good study Bible, see “For More Information” at the end of this guide, or ask your pastor. Your church library may have one you can borrow.)
- Read through the remainder of this Leader’s Guide. Decide which activities or questions you want to focus on, and whether you need to make any adaptations to suit your particular context. If time permits and you have interest, locate and read material from the section “For More Information” at the end of this guide. Note that the Exploring section suggests choosing two of the three activities offered. Determine which two will be best for your group.
- Make sure you have copies of the Bible or photocopies of the Letter of James, as well as copies of the Participant Handout for as many as you anticipate will be in attendance. If there is no blackboard in the classroom, take a flip chart and marker.
- For activity 5, you will need to make a photocopy of James and cut it into thought units (using your

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome and opening prayer
- Introduction to the session
- Pretest: What does divine wisdom look like?

EXPLORING

- Friendship with God
- A perfect life
- True religion

RESPONDING

- How has our understanding grown?

CLOSING

- Prayer

own judgment as to starting and stopping points but keeping the units to no more than four or five verses apiece). Also take seven sheets of blank paper, and print the points listed under “A Perfect Life” in the Participant Handout (“perseverance in trial makes one perfect and triumphs over evil,” etc.) on them, one per page. When you get to the room where you will meet, tape the seven papers to the walls around the room and hold tape and the slips of paper with text in reserve for the activity.

Teaching Tips

- Two issues that have often bogged down interpretations of James are the question of authorship and the question of the author’s relationship to the apostle Paul. Be sure to read the text boxes which treat these

questions, and decide whether you want to give any attention to these matters in the session. In the interest of time, it may be better simply to direct readers' attention to them for them to consider later, on their own.

- Some readers appreciate James because of its emphasis on *doing*: faith is perfected in action. For persons committed to social justice, James speaks a message as loud, clear, and compelling as any book in the Bible. What may be less obvious is James's emphasis on the *motivation* for doing good works. The author is not simply legislating action; rather, he is promoting a spirituality or way of being which is so devoted to serving God and loving neighbor that one *cannot help* but do good works. Encourage participants to look behind the letter's calls to action, so that they may discern how the way of life to which James invites us leads naturally to works of love.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome and Opening Prayer

After the class has assembled, greet them and welcome any newcomers. Pray for God's guidance throughout your lesson. Use this prayer or one of your own:

Holy God, every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, comes from you. You are unimaginably generous and eternally constant in your love for us. Teach us this morning through your Word as written in the Letter of James. Open our hearts to your love and wisdom. May what we learn today help us to live with single-minded devotion to you. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. **Amen.**

2. Introduction to the Session

Inform participants that today you will be studying the New Testament Letter of James. Summarize the points made in the Introduction to the Participant Handout:

- James is one of the books of the New Testament that gets the least attention, in part because of prejudice against it that has prevailed since the Reformation.
- Martin Luther called it "an epistle of straw" because he thought that it didn't say enough about Jesus and contradicted Paul's teaching about justification by faith alone.

- Yet, when we put these prejudgments aside, we see that James is full of insights relevant to living faithfully in today's world. It is not made of straw but of pure gold!

3. Pretest: What Does Divine Wisdom Look Like?

Explain to participants that James teaches us what it means to live a life based on the wisdom of God. Ask them to list characteristics of a wise life (write these as bullet points on a blackboard or flip chart). Then ask what steps they think a person should take to try to incorporate wisdom into one's life. Write these down also. At the end of the session you can come back to this list and see how your study of James has expanded and refined the group's ideas.

Exploring (30 minutes)

There will probably not be enough time to do all three activities in this section (4, 5, and 6). Choose two in case there is not time and don't worry if the discussion eats up your time. If there is interest in making this into a two-week study, continue the discussion next week.

4. Friendship with God

Begin by having one or more participants read the first chapter of James. Then allow participants a few minutes to read through the section of the handout entitled "Choosing Roads—and Friends—Wisely."

Suggested activity: Reflection on how consumerism drives our desires.

- Say to the participants: We live in a society that bombards us with the message that we need to buy the right products in order to live a good life. We have eight-year-olds who badger their parents about a video game, thirty-year-olds who spend countless hours in quest of the perfect cell phone, forty-five-year-olds who obsess over losing weight, having the right look, or getting their kids into the best college (all of which usually entail expenditures of money). We don't just consume—we are *consumed* by these kinds of concerns. Yet none of these or other such quests offers *salvation*.
- Reflect silently for a moment: Have you ever experienced this kind of obsession? How did you feel when

you were caught in the grip of it? If you obtained what you were seeking, did the satisfaction last long? Why or why not?

- Discuss: How do we recognize when we are in the grip of an obsession marking us as a “friend of the world,” and what do we do about it? How do we offer resistance? How do we make a deliberate choice to be a “friend of God” instead? (List answers on the blackboard or flip chart.)

5. A Perfect Life

Allow a few minutes for participants to read the next section of the Participant Handout, titled “A Perfect Life.”

Suggested activity: Surveying the whole letter.

- Divide the group into groups of two, then distribute the photocopied passages of the letter that you brought with you. Point out the papers with themes/headings that you have posted on the wall. Instruct participants to study their passages and figure out which of the headings fit those passages best, and then tape the passage to the relevant paper. Reassure them that there is room for interpretation, and some passages may fit well under more than one heading.
- When everyone is finished, if there are some passages that seem not to fit, have the whole group discuss them and decide. This exercise will give participants opportunity to reflect on the entire letter, and to see how seemingly unrelated passages tie into a few central themes.

6. True Religion

Allow participants a few minutes to read through the section of the handout titled “True Religion.”

Suggested activity: Angels on my shoulders.

- Say to the participants: James is deeply concerned about living a life of integrity, or what ancient Jews and Christians called a *single-minded* life. The single-minded person is whole and undivided in his devotion to pleasing God, whereas the double-minded person wants to please God but also wants what she wants. Some ancient writers depicted the state of double-mindedness as one in which we have a tempting angel on one shoulder and a strengthening

angel on the other shoulder. (Maybe you have seen cartoon versions of this scenario.)

- Reflect silently for a moment: Can you remember a time in your life when you knew that something you were doing was wrong, but you did it anyway? What means of persuasion did the “tempting angel” use to lead you down the path that you chose?
- Discuss: Can you think of examples when the church has behaved in a double-minded fashion? (As, for example, during slavery—see the quotation of Frederick Douglass in this section of the Participant Handout.) How can faithful people help themselves as individuals and the church as a body to overcome a state of double-mindedness? What steps can be taken to lead us to “true religion”?

Responding (5 minutes)

7. How Has Our Understanding Grown?

Go back to the list you made on divine wisdom at the outset of the session. Ask how participants’ views have expanded or changed as a result of the study, and make additions or changes to what you had written down to reflect these altered views.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Prayer

Offer a closing prayer. If you feel able to do so, try to make up your own prayer, incorporating insights or emphases that emerged in the class discussion. In this way you can effectively tie the entire session together and offer the whole up to God. If you do not feel competent to pray extemporaneously, you may use the following:

God, we are grateful that you brought us here to show us what true religion looks like. As we go forth from this place help us to seek your way continuously. Give us single hearts to love you and serve you. Teach us what it means for our faith to be perfected in our actions. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- **Exploring our relationship to the world.** Say to the participants: James writes about God and the world as if they are in stark opposition to each other. You cannot have it both ways, according to James—you cannot be both a friend of God and a friend of the

world. (By “world” he seems to mean those forces that can potentially divide our loyalties and interfere with our devotion to God.) Ask participants: What are the strengths of James’s negative view of the world? What are the weaknesses? (List answers on the blackboard or flip chart.)

- **Enduring trials.** James tells us that we should “consider it nothing but joy” when we face trials of various sorts, because the testing of our faith produces endurance and leads us to perfection. Ask the participants whether they agree with this teaching. Why or why not? Why is it so difficult to put our trust in God when times are hard? After a brief discussion, point out that James was probably addressing the entire Christian community (rather than individuals) when he wrote these words. In other words, it is the church *as a body* that should face trials with joy. Ask participants whether this insight makes a difference in their interpretation of the passage, and why or why not.
- **Controlling the tongue.** Throughout James there are references to different kinds of problematic speech:

boasting speech, for example, or slandering speech. And in 3:6, James rails against the tongue, which he calls “a world of iniquity.” Say to participants: “Ask yourself silently: do you ever engage in patterns of speech that are hurtful to others, or that compromise your devotion to God? Be honest with yourself.” After a minute or so of silence, ask why it is so hard to get a grip on the tongue, and what actions can be taken to gain better control. Write these ideas on the blackboard or flip chart.

For More Information

The Discipleship Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version including Apocrypha, ed. Bruce C. Birch et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

Patrick J. Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, ed. Walter J. Harrelson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).