

The Challenge of James

Feel free to use this guide to study the final three chapters of James, together with others or on your own.

Chapter 3

Language holds incredible power. Words have the potential to create and destroy. They can speak across time, space, and culture, and while sometimes a little translation is needed, we hear in the book of James a word of encouragement to take this power seriously.

Read James 3:1-12

Taking seriously the power and language and speech, the central chapter of James addresses “the tongue.”

- Any teacher can tell you that teaching isn’t easy, but why are teachers singled out as being so central to sins of speech?
- Why is the tongue so hard to tame? Do you agree with the writer of James, in their apparent claim that how we speak is more dangerous than other methods of sinfulness? Why?
- Does we—either as individuals, as a Church, or as a society— take seriously the power of language, both spoken or written?

Read James 3:13-18

The book of James distinguishes between various understandings of wisdom: so-called “earthly” wisdom, and wisdom “from above.”

- What does James mean by “wisdom?”
- How do we recognize wisdom?
- How do we attain or gain wisdom? What impact does it have on our behavior?

Chapter 4

The writer of James cautions the reader to be mindful of our relationships with others, and the impact our actions have on the people and world around us.

Read James 4:1-10

The book of James is addressed to communities from all over, and recognizes that conflict is likely to be found wherever the church is.

- Where do these conflicts come from?
- What causes us to turn away from each other? From God?
- Verse 4:9 encourages us to “lament and mourn and weep,” and to “let [our] laughter be turned into mourning and [our] joy to dejection,” which seems like some of the most discouraging advice from the Bible. What does this verse mean? Is it as troubling as it initially sounds?

Read: James 4:11-17

The book of James encourages humility, self-reflection, and action. These verses are convicting, suggesting that not only do we sin, but that we dare to usurp the Lord’s position.

- What do these verses suggest about the role of God in our world? Is that image consistent with what we hear of elsewhere in the Bible?
- Speech is again lifted up as being a principal stumbling block. Why is this such a focal point, in James?
- Verse 17 suggests a definition of sin: knowing the right thing, and failing to do it. Do you agree? If not, what is sin?

Chapter 5

In many ways, our priorities determine our behavior. The final chapter of this book encourages us to be mindful of our priorities, and faithful in our actions, even in times of uncertainty or anguish.

Read James 5:1-6

The Bible doesn't spend a lot of time singing the praises of the wealthy, and James seems to be just as potent in his critique of wealth as prophets like Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, or the Gospel of Luke.

- Why are the rich judged so harshly in the Bible, and specifically in James?
- The writer of James doesn't mince words, when it comes to addressing income inequality. How should the church, in our current context, address it?
- If temporal goods and riches are hollow and fleeting, what should be treasure?

Read James 5:7-12

Our lives are unpredictable, and events in our world seldom occur how we might plan or expect them to.

- Where do you turn for encouragement, when afflicted by suffering?
- What are you waiting for right now? How do you keep patient?
- Verse 8 suggests "the coming of the Lord is near." What does that mean? What are we as a church collectively waiting for?
- Why does verse 12 instruct us not to swear any oaths, we we "fall under condemnation?"

Read James 5:13-20

The timeliness of these final verses is uncanny, encouraging prayer in the face of hardship and joy, adversity and prosperity.

- What is the purpose of prayer?
- Why does James link healing with confession and forgiveness?
- What effect, if any, does prayer have?
- What does it mean, if there's no readily perceivable effect that results from praying, e.g., we pray for healing that doesn't come?
- For what ought we pray?

Concluding questions

- Martin Luther famously disliked this epistle. Do you agree that the book of James should be removed from the biblical canon?
- Chapter 2, with its focus on works, is often what we think about when we speak of James, but is that the defining theme of this epistle? If not, what is?
- The book of James has a number of specific recommendations for how we should live, and critiques of how we often fall short of that vision. What should we learn from this book? Are there any lessons we should be cautious *not* to heed?