

Introduction

'Faith without deeds is dead' writes James in his letter to the early church (*James 2:26*).

This Autumn, we are going to be exploring what this means for us as individuals, as a church and for our community. We'll be looking at it as part of a journey through the whole of James' letter.

We live in a culture heavily shaped by consumerism –we expect to be able to pick and choose what we want to have and do. It's easy to get swept along by the culture of 'What's in it for me?' But all too often we can get so concerned about what we see as our individual needs, that community suffers – people become increasingly lonely and isolated – often through their own choices. Sometimes this only becomes obvious when something goes wrong.

With this strong current in society, it's hard to resist the same pressures within the church ('polluted by the world' as James puts it). We can easily slip into treating our faith as something to 'meet our needs' rather than as a gift from God to be shared with others. Faith can become an extra 'add on' to our lives, rather than the starting point that shapes everything we do. Worship can become 'what's in it for me' rather than an offering of our whole beings to the living God.

James' letter gives us lots of straight-talking practical advice to help us paddle against the flow – to live as effective Christians in today's culture. His picture of the church is as a community living in a distinctive way – putting their faith into action in the way they live. It's a community that is not closed – but is active in the world – changing the wider society which they are part of, by showing love for all.

So, over the next few months, as we recognise the cultural pressures upon us, let's not just treat this as a theoretical 'study', but instead

become Faith Activists – applying James' practical and challenging advice to our lives. Let's put **faith into action** – reshaping the way we relate to God, to one another and to our neighbours, such that we become less like consumers and increasingly like a united community, acting together to share God's transforming love with our town.

The Book of James

We're told in this letter that it was written by 'James', but it's not absolutely clear which one! We do know that this is not James, brother of John, who was one of Jesus' three closest friends –he was killed earlier (*Acts 12:2*). We can't be sure, but most likely this is James, a brother of Jesus (or at least half-brother –because Jesus' dad was God!) –see *Galatians 1:19*, *Acts 15:13* etc.

Format of the Series

In our Sunday and Wednesday services, we'll be going through the letter chapter by chapter from start to finish. However, there are certain clear repeated themes in James. In our Growth Groups, we'll be following these themes in each session –picking out the verses from the book relating to the theme. We will still cover the whole book, just in a different way, which should give a slightly different perspective on the letter and help in applying it to our lives.

At the same time, for each session there are a couple of practical exercises which follow through the series, designed to encourage us to be more sensitive to listening and responding to God.

If you want extra material on James to use in your group or individually, then there are some suggestions at the end of these notes.

This material has been written drawing on a range of resources including commentaries & study guides (eg Motyer, Davids, Tasker, Beasley-Murray, Wright, Chan)

1: Introducing James

This week is an introduction to the whole book to give an overview before getting stuck into the themes next time. It would be helpful to let people read through the introduction to the notes first.

WELCOME & WORSHIP

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Each share one good thing and one 'not so good' thing that's happened since you last met.

Spend a few moments praying for one another in 3s-4s –giving thanks for the good things & asking for God's help with the 'not so good' things.

WORD

EVERY WEEK DURING THIS SERIES, Please try this...

After worship and before reading the Bible passage, spend 3 minutes in silence (or sometimes you could use quiet instrumental music) . Encourage each person to ask God to speak to them. Each listen for anything you think he's saying or any pictures he's giving you –either now or from the past fortnight. If other distractions come to mind, then ask God if he wants to say anything about them –or set them to one side.

Now share together anything that you feel God has been saying to you. & you are comfortable sharing. Some will be from God and some won't –we're human & make mistakes and this is where others can help us. It's helpful to write things down and look for patterns in discerning what God could be saying to the group or individuals.

Generally God speaks to a person directly, so most things we hear from God are for us as individuals. Sometimes he speaks to us about our group, church or community, but first we should always apply them to ourselves.

THIS WEEK: You may like to discuss how you feel about this exercise. You may also like to share stories of when you've felt God speak/nudge you!

Read James Chapters 1-5

Reading the whole letter will take about 10 minutes, but will give an overview of how people would have originally heard it.

It's probably easiest for a few volunteers to read a section at a time.

Allow people not to read out loud if they find it difficult.

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- What is your first reaction to the letter?
- How does the letter overall sound to you? What do you feel is the tone and atmosphere? How do you feel about this?
- What main themes do you see in the letter?
- From reading the letter, why do you think it was written? What were the addressees like? What problems did they face? What was their society like?
- Which of the themes in this letter seem relevant to us today and which ones don't? If James was writing a similar length letter to us, what themes do you think he would he add or leave out?
- Is there anything in the letter which you find particularly interesting or challenging? Is there any particular bit you're looking forward to thinking about further?

WHAT NEXT?

- In 2s-3s: Share any challenges that you face in putting your faith into action. Pray for one another.
- What particular problems do you see in our local community? Pray for people affected by these.

2: Faith Activated

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...
Play a few rounds of Charades or a similar game that involves actions without words.

WORSHIP

Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.

WORD

DO The Weekly Exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see last week's notes). This time, you could first each take a pen and paper. Read Psalm 37:1-9 together to one another. During or after listening, each draw something that comes to mind.

Read James 1:22-25, 2:14-26, 4:13-17

Discuss your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- James 2:26 likens faith without deeds to being like looking in the mirror (1:23) or a body without spirit (2:26). Jesus used parables to make similar points. Imagine you were doing a primary school assembly on faith without deeds. In 2s-3s, try coming up with an alternative illustration to show that faith without deeds is dead. Share your ideas with the whole group.

- Some people would suggest that we need to learn lots about God before acting on our faith. What do you think James would say to that argument?
- Many people locally would say they are Christians because they believe in God. How would you respond to someone like this if they started talking about it? (note James 2:19)
- Some say that James' emphasis on the importance of actions in faith contradicts Paul's emphasis on being saved by grace through faith and not by works. Is James saying that doing good deeds alone is enough? How would you explain how James' teaching fits together with Paul's in Ephesians 2:4-10?
- How do you think we should plan (or not plan) our lives according to James' advice in 4:13-16?

People often define sin as 'doing something bad'. In 4:17, James defines it as 'not doing good'.

- Can you give examples of the difference between the two?
- What difference would it make to your life if you understood sin in the way James describes in 4:17 and lived accordingly?

WHAT NEXT?

Discuss how your group could put your faith into action together more. Think of people known to you you'd like to pray for. Pray for those people. Now talk about how you could do something practical to put action alongside prayer.

If your group hasn't recently, plan a social event for the church that friends and neighbours could be invited to – and let us know your ideas!

NEXT TIME: Ask everyone (if they're willing) to bring to the group a resource that they've found particularly helpful in living as a Christian. It maybe daily study notes or a book or a website etc.

3: Everyone Welcome!

WELCOME

See Last Time! Share the resource that you've brought that you've found helpful in living as a Christian. If you haven't brought one –then tell about something you've found helpful.

WORSHIP

Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.

WORD

DO The Weekly Exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see last week's notes). This time, you could ask God to bring to mind a particular person that he wants you to pray for and then ask him to help you pray.

Read James 1:9-11, 2:1-13, 5:1-6, 5:19-20

Discuss your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- If James wrote to us today from one of the world's poorest countries, what do you think he would say?
- Looking at James 5:1-6: In what ways can we each put our faith into action regarding issues of world poverty?
- In what ways might we over-value wealth in our own lives or in others?

- Do you think something similar to the situation described in James 2:1-4 could happen in one of our churches? What types of people do we give more or less attention to? Why?
- If someone with no church background came to our church one Sunday, how do you think they would feel? What could you do to make them feel more welcome?
- How can we become more welcoming to everyone in our community as a church?
- What would you say to a friend who said 'I'm a good person. I generally do what's right. That's enough isn't it?' –see James 2:10
- James encourages us to correct sin (5:20), but also to welcome everyone and not to judge (2:3-4). Give examples of when it might be difficult to follow both sides of this teaching. How can we put this into practice?

WHAT NEXT?

- Why not find out about one of the mission or relief partner organisations that we support as a church, then choose one to pray for as a group on a regular basis (maybe a couple of times a term). One of you could be the link to find out information for the group.
- Pray for us as a church –that we would be increasingly welcoming to our local community.

Reminder: Are you planning a church social event to welcome others to?

4: Listening and Speaking

WELCOME

*Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...
Play a few rounds of a word game such as 'Call my bluff' or 'Balderdash'. What are your favourite words and why?*

WORSHIP

Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.

WORD

DO The Weekly Exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see first week's notes). This time, in the silence each read James 1:19-21 first and then ask God to speak to you.

Read James 1:19-21; 1:26-27; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:12

Discuss your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- When do you find it hardest or easiest to be 'quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry' (1:19)?
- How you could become better at listening? Share practical ideas together
- In 3:4: James implies that what we say is not just a result of what we think, but that what we say can shape our lives – for good or bad. He

also suggests that what we say can corrupt the person who says it – not just other people (3:6). How can this be so?

- How can the tongue be like a spark setting off a forest fire (3:6)?
 - Give examples of when you've seen this happen.
 - What can we do about it – whether the spark is caused by us or by others?
- Are there any circumstances in which anger is justified? Why or why not?
 - How do you reconcile James's advice on anger and Jesus' behaviour in Matthew 21:12-17?
- How easy do you find it to be consistent in your speech? In what situations do you find it hardest to control what you say?
- In 5:12, James condemns swearing. Why do you think he does this? (see also Matthew 5:33-37)
- What does it mean in practice to 'keep oneself from being polluted by the world' whilst also putting faith into action? (1:27)
- How would you describe 'religion that is pure and faultless' in your own words? How does this compare with James' description?

WHAT NEXT?

- Take a moment to think of times when you could make time to listen to God this week. Then...
- **CHALLENGE!** If you don't already, why not get a notebook (journal) and write down regularly anything you think God is saying to you, or any thoughts you have about God or living as a Christian –whether from Growth Group, on a Sunday or during the week.
- Share situations when you want to get better...
 - 1: at **listening** (maybe to a particular person)
 - 2: at **speaking** (saying the right things in the right way)
 - Pray for one another.

Reminder: Did you identify an organisation/individual to pray for regularly last time?

5: Wisdom & Patience

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...
Each share one really good piece of wise advice you've been given.

WORSHIP

Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.

WORD

Do the weekly exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see first week's notes). This time, you could think back through the day so far. Ask God if he wants to say something to you about anything that has happened or the people you've met.

Read James 1:2-5; 1:12-18; 3:13-18; 5:7-11

Discuss your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- How do you react to the suggestion that we should 'consider it pure joy' whenever we 'face trials of many kinds' (1:2)?
- In what ways do you think perseverance can lead to maturity and completeness (v4)?
- People sometimes say 'God sent that to try me'. How would you respond based on James 1:12-18?

- How would you describe the picture of God that James paints in 1:2-5 and 1:12-18?
- What is the difference between being tempted and giving in to temptation?
- How do James' comments on temptation compare with Jesus's experiences in Luke 4:1-14?
- Split into 2s or 3s. Each take one aspect of earthly wisdom from 3:13 and one aspect of heavenly wisdom from 3:17. Share some examples you have seen of each. What effect has it had on the people involved?
- What would you say are the differences between following the wisdom of 3:17 and being a doormat?
- Describe some of the ways our culture encourages impatience. How does this affect you personally? (see 5:7)
- What things most test your patience? How might setting them in the context of eternity help (5:7)?

WHAT NEXT?

In 2s or 3s, share any situations in which you're feeling tempted, finding it hard to persevere, to be patient or to live as 'heavenly wise'. Are there situations where you could 'sow peace' this week? Pray for one another.

Pray for those who work hard to be peacemakers in world –locally and internationally.

REMINDER: Did anyone have a go at the challenge of last time? If so, how are you getting on?

6: Praying in Faith

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...
Each answer: Do you love or hate physical exercise? Why?

WORSHIP

Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.

WORD

DO The Weekly Exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see first week's notes). This time, ask God to bring to mind something about his character –who he is or what he's like. Take time to reflect on what that means for you.

Read James 1:5-8; 1:16-18; 4:1-10; 5:13-17

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- Some people exercise to get stronger spiritually (others just talk about it!) What exercises can we do to get stronger spiritually?
- James says that when we ask for wisdom, we shouldn't doubt that God will give it to us (v5-8). He also implies that those who doubt in everything they do are unstable (v8). But are there some times when

periods of questioning or doubt can lead to spiritual growth? If so, how can this happen? What do you think? Give examples.

- What are the most common causes of quarrels
 - ...in the lives of those you know?
 - ...in churches?
 What can you do about them?
- Think about how you pray. When do you find that you're tempted to ask God for things with wrong motives (4:3)? What difference would 'right motives' make to your prayers?
- What does it mean in practice to submit ourselves to God in the way described in 4:7-10?
- Look at 4:8-10, 5:13 and Romans 12:15. When is it appropriate to express different emotions and attitudes?
- How easy do you find it to follow James's advice in 5:16?

WHAT NEXT?

Throughout his book, James's focus has been on putting faith into action.

- Share (maybe in 2s-3s) what new practical steps have you taken or are going to take to put your faith into action.
- Pray for one another.
- Pray for our church that we would become more of a community of disciples living the way James challenges us to.

7: Prayer Week

If your group hasn't had a week devoted to prayer this term, then please have a go this time!

There's a page of ideas on the Growth Groups page of the website at:

<https://www.whitfieldparish.org/grow-in-faith/growth-groups/>

to help you get started.

You could begin by reading James 5:13-18 and you could make Christmas a particular focus for your prayers – for our church and community.

Extras

If you want extra material to explore James, either as a group or individually, then you could use the video series on the YouVersion Bible App by Francis Chan. The readings fit with the ones we are using in church. The links to the videos by RightNow Media on YouTube are below...

Episodes

- 1: https://youtu.be/sfQv6_Se_BE
- 2: <https://youtu.be/gAZI4W-QBww>
- 3: <https://youtu.be/SoSPCW9jqNw>
- 4: <https://youtu.be/bGzB3b-8pJM>
- 5: https://youtu.be/_tJ736IXCbs
- 6: https://youtu.be/W64hbqSOU_w
- 7: <https://youtu.be/KVUCvd41YB0>
- 8: <https://youtu.be/mVOBmJwSs-Y>
- 9: <https://youtu.be/YKYRsvjHZmk>
- 10: <https://youtu.be/WESWylgapUI>
- 11: <https://youtu.be/4KtqS20Wi-0>
- 12: <https://youtu.be/Lw3VnSvzCR8>