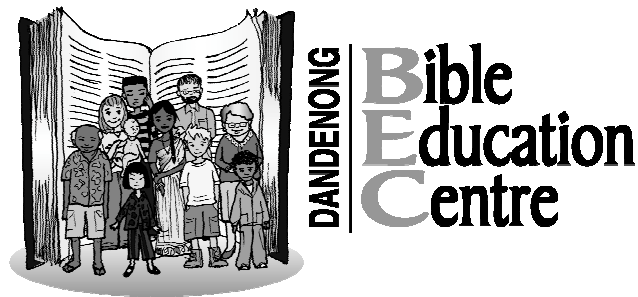

Practical Christianity

A letter from James



Notes prepared for the Dandenong Bible Education Centre, October 2008.

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COURSE AIMS

This course on Practical Christianity will briefly answer the question “Why Christianity?”, but mainly the aim of the course is to inspire or reinvigorate our Christianity by:

- Finding practical ways to be like Jesus every day;
- Exercising our Christian decision-making;
- Examining what to do when we fail; and
- Strengthening our "Jesus" muscles!

The course is aimed at helping each other grow – working together as a group to expand our knowledge of practical Christianity and extending our ability to live it.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER OF JAMES

The letter says that James wrote it, but beyond that, nothing is known for sure about its authorship.

It is commonly believed that the writer was James the half-brother of Jesus – the oldest son of Mary and Joseph. In these notes, we will assume that the letter was written by this James, spoken of in Galatians 1:19 as “James the Lord's brother”.

This James is spoken of in Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3, 15:40 (possibly), 16:1 (possibly); Luke 24:10 (possibly); John 7:5; Acts 1:14, 12:17, 15:13, 21:13; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 2:12 and Jude 1:1.

The letter is written in good Greek. This may indicate a man knowledgeable about the language, but not necessarily familiar with using it every day.

It is thought by many to be one of the earliest books of the New Testament (about 45 AD), while others suggest it may have been nearer to the time of his death in about 62AD. The letter is addressed simply to the twelve tribes scattered throughout the world. Some take this to indicate that it was aimed specifically at Jewish believers, while others point out that believers – including Gentiles – are spoken of as being the 'Israel of God' (eg Galatians 6:16) and thus this letter may be addressed to all believers everywhere, whether Jewish or not.

There is no lengthy introduction and no conclusion at all. The letter is short; it gets straight to the point and is often very blunt.

Structure of the book

The letter written by James can be broken up into sections based on the many different subjects he covers. The following table contains one possible division in a way that shows even the small changes of subject in the letter.

Reference	Subject
1:1	Introduction
1:2-4	Trials and perseverance (see also 1:12; 5:11)
1:5-8	Wisdom and the need for faith when requesting it
1:9-11	Humility and Pride (see also 4:6)
1:12	Perseverance and its reward (see also 1:2-4; 5:11)
1:13-15	Temptation
1:16-18	Good things come from God including being children of God
1:19-25	Listening and responding

Reference	Subject
1:26-27	True Religion
2:1-7	Favouritism
2:8-11	The Royal Law - "love your neighbour as yourself". Breaking one law makes one a lawbreaker
2:12-13	The law giving freedom. The importance of showing mercy.
2:14-26	Faith and deeds
3:1-12	Taming the tongue
3:13-18	Two kinds of wisdom
4:1-3	Human desire and selfishness
4:4-6	Friendship with the world is hatred toward God
4:7-10	Submission to God
4:11-12	Slander and fault-finding
4:13-16	Boasting about plans for the future
4:17	If you know what is good but don't do it, that is sin.
5:1-6	Warning to rich people who oppress the poor
5:7-11	Patience and perseverance in suffering (see also 1:2-4; 1:12). Warning not to grumble against each other.
5:12	Ban on swearing of oaths; just keep your word always
5:13-18	The power of prayer and faith
5:19-20	Bringing back those who wander from the truth

The author's approach and motivation

James, probably the brother of Jesus who would have grown up with him in the village of Nazareth, did not claim any family ties, but rather acknowledges Jesus as his master when he opens with the words "James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ".

When, where and why was the letter written? It was written to the twelve tribes living in many places around the world. These notes will assume that means the Jews who had spread around the world after the defeat and dispersion of the in the centuries before Jesus. They had knew about the Old Testament, but needed to be reminded of the practical ways in which Christianity should affect their lives. Jewish worship had become a list of do's and don'ts and James is trying to teach them how to apply the teachings of Jesus in daily life. Whether aimed at Jewish or non-Jewish believers, this letter faces head-on our tendency to treat Christianity as a nice theory, but not really practical.

1. TRIALS AND PERSEVERANCE

Stories of brave deeds leave us full of admiration. Hearing of people who make sacrifices fills us with a wish to be like them. Our hearts are softened when we think of generosity and human kindness and we admire people who show them – they can be our heroes. They can also be our examples and Peter, the disciple of Jesus is one of these.

1.1 Case Study – Peter

Peter was a fisherman. Jesus called him to be his disciple, to follow him as he preached throughout Israel and to become a fisherman who caught men for God. He was brash and brave; once he even walked for a short time on the windswept water of the Sea of Galilee in the pitch black of a stormy night. He was sure he would do anything for Jesus, and just before Jesus was betrayed, Peter confidently said that even if all the other disciples denied Jesus, he would never deny him. In the event, it was he who denied Jesus three times as Jesus had predicted.

The crunch had come. Peter had the stark choice: give up or admit failure and try again. He made the right choice – choosing to try again – and Jesus accepted his repentance. But from then on he knew what to expect. His life was full of trials of his faith including suffering because of his beliefs. He endured. He persevered. Late in his life he wrote:

But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.
1 Peter 2:20-21

Peter had seen Jesus' example first hand; had been asked personally by Jesus to follow his example and did so. He is said to have died after being crucified upside down in Rome. He had kept the faith and persevered through suffering. After failure, he had picked himself up and started again.

1.2 Suffering

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds
James 1:2

James starts with a paradox; rejoice when you have various trials. Christianity has always been a challenge to human thinking. Human wisdom suggests that we should take things easy, but Christianity presents a different picture. Jesus is a saviour who won out through suffering, a tireless preacher and servant of the people. Our society claims to admire such people, but in reality, they are thought of as naive.

So why would we be happy when suffering trials? The answer is found in the goal of Christianity – being like Jesus.

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:14 (ESV)

The point is simply that suffering is inevitable if you are a true Christian, so for the believers James wrote to, it was a mark of their discipleship that they were suffering. If you find this hard to accept, just think about the following:

They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.
Acts 5:40-41

... we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance.
Romans 5:3

It's hard to copy, isn't it? There is a saying from the author G K Chesterton: "*The fact is, not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; rather, Christianity has been found difficult and not tried*". So why does suffering come if you try to be a genuine Christian? It all comes because of sin – your sin and the sin of others. In the beginning, God created the world without sin, but mankind chose

Reflection...

1. When you suffer, do you rejoice or just feel sorry for yourself?
2. Do you often suffer for doing good?
3. Can you think of examples in the Bible where people suffered for doing right, but rejoiced in their suffering?

1.3 Endurance

...because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:3-4

James doesn't just say that all suffering is good, however – he says suffering for Jesus is good because of what it produces – perseverance, endurance, steadfastness, holding on, maturity.

When you travel in a car on the roads around our cities or in the country, you will often pass small crosses by the side of the road. Such crosses often have flowers placed near them because they are memorials to someone who has died in a car accident on that spot. If you often go past one of these crosses, in many cases you will notice that the flowers are renewed frequently. Over the years, the people to whom the cross is important will continue to show the tokens of their love for that person or people. You will probably never know them, but they are setting you an example of persistence and perseverance.

Ideas to consider...

1. Think of someone you know and admire because of his or her perseverance. Think of a few areas in their life where they have stuck at something when you have given up. Try to talk to them about how they did it. Maybe you could ask them how they manage to hang on a little longer when a situation is very difficult and they want to give up.
2. When you look back on the best times in your life so far, were they hard times or easy times?

Jesus told a parable about a farmer who sowed seed in four different types of soil and explained that they were different types of people and how we could learn from each. He told about rocky soil and how seeds planted in the soil would come up quickly because the soil was shallow and warm. However, because there was little soil, the plants had no root and little water and would wither quickly. When explaining the parable to his disciples, he described these as people who heard the message of the kingdom and immediately received it with joy, but they lasted only a short time. When trouble or persecution came, they quickly fell away – they had no persistence. Jesus contrasted this with the seeds that fell in good soil who, he explained, were people who heard the message and held on to it and produced fruit to God through their persistence. You can read the parable in Luke 8:4-8 and its explanation in Luke 8:11-15.



Endurance is necessary because life is often long and life can be very hard. We will all know of examples – people we have known – where a lot of suffering has come without any obvious reason.

We will also know of people who have been soured by such things so that the joy has gone from their life. Sometimes, their faith will have been the first casualty of their suffering. Often we will also know people who have been strengthened by their suffering. These are the people who have learned to rejoice in suffering – whether suffering for Jesus or the suffering that comes at different times through life. Some people you may visit in hospital and feel at the end of the visit that you have been strengthened more than the people you went to help! If you want to learn about endurance, think about examples of people who endured. There are plenty in the Bible – after all, endurance is important to God. Take a quick look at Psalm 136, which focuses on his enduring love.

1.3.1 Some people who persisted and endured

Name	How they endured
Joseph	Chose to serve God even when blamed for things he did not do. See Genesis 39.
Job	Would not let go of his faith despite losing all his goods and most of his family. See Job 2:1-10
Moses	Led and defended the people of Israel before God even when they tried to kill him. See Numbers 14:1-23 (Numbers 13 tells of how the spies visited Canaan and gave a bad report)
Jeremiah	Continued to speak God's messages when no-one would listen. See Jeremiah 20:7-13.
Daniel	Prayed to God when the penalty for such prayer was death. See Daniel 6:1-17.
Jesus' apostles	Continued to tell about Jesus although they were persecuted. See Acts 4:1-31

1.3.2 What does God want us to persevere with?

Here are some examples of characteristics and behaviour we must persevere with, things we must endure and some of the reasons why.

Prayer

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Ephesians 6:18

Doing God's will

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10:36

It [love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1 Corinthians 13:7

Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations Revelation 2:25-26

Resisting temptation

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

Unity and helping others

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, Romans 15:5

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. 2 Timothy 2:10

1.4 During the next week...

1.4.1 Goal setting

What goals can you set in regard to perseverance? How can you aim not to give up? How do you measure whether you have given up or not?

Set a goal for yourself for the week. You will have to choose it for yourself, but here are some suggestions.

1. Review the things that are important to you that you want to persevere with and acknowledge them to God. Try to include some short-term items that you are having difficulty keeping going with.
2. Try to acknowledge to others that God is your source of strength in suffering.
3. When you are tempted to give up about something important – try to persevere for just one more day. Then during that day, see if you can pray about it often (maybe every hour!). See if this helps you to endure.
4. Make sure you don't avoid doing what Jesus would do just because you think you may be laughed at or made to suffer in some other way

Many people find it easier if they have someone to review their success or failure with. You may want to find someone who can help you in this way.

1.4.2 Thought provokers

1. How can we learn to rejoice in suffering?
2. Take note of a situation where you thought you had a choice between doing right and suffering as a result, or just keeping quiet. Which did you choose? Why? If you had the opportunity again, would you do the same? Why? Could you have made a better choice than you did?
3. Can you foresee any situations in the near future where you will have to make such a choice? What will your choice be? How can you try to make sure you make the best choice? Are you able to suffer and still rejoice?
4. Which of the following tests your persistence most:
 - Keeping your temper?
 - Praying several times every day?
 - Reading the Bible every day?
 - Exercising every day?
 - Speaking kindly to others?
 - Being patient with those who annoy you?
5. Have you any stories from your family or where relatives have made a choice for Jesus and suffered for it? Did they rejoice in their suffering? Would you make the same choice as they did? Why?
6. When you are suffering, do you pray to God more or less? What does this say about your relationship with him?

2. HUMILITY AND PRIDE

Having encouraged his readers to rejoice in suffering and to develop their perseverance, James also acknowledges the importance of wisdom. He highlights pride and humility and the different responses of poor and rich people to their new position in Christ.

2.1 Wisdom

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. James 1:5

Not just knowledge, wisdom is how you apply knowledge. Information by itself is no use, but wisdom is using the knowledge in good and productive ways. Wisdom is the difference between doing something just because you can, and doing something because it is the best thing to do.

James advises that anyone who lacks wisdom should ask for it. Everyone has felt the need for more wisdom at times. Paul speaks about the vast wisdom of God:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
Romans 11:33

If we see that God has more wisdom than we do and would like to share that wisdom, James explains how we can. Ask and it will be given – but make sure that you ask in faith.

Examples are often the easiest way to demonstrate an idea, and the Bible has many examples of people who were given extra wisdom by God.

Joseph was one of the twelve sons of Jacob (who was a grandson of Abraham). It was Jacob who had his name changed to Israel and was the father of the nation of Israel. Joseph became a slave in Egypt and interpreted a dream for Pharaoh the king of Egypt. The dream predicted 7 years of plentiful harvests followed by 7 years of drought. After Joseph interpreted the dream, he also gave advice to Pharaoh that he should collect the extra produce in the first 7 years so that the country would have enough food for the 7 years of famine. Pharaoh was very impressed with Joseph's wisdom and said:

..."Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."
Genesis 41:39-40

Joseph not only knew the future because God had shown it to him, he also knew what to do with the knowledge. The wisdom came from God and made him able to do better than he could have without God's help. It was an amazing change for Joseph who woke up in the morning as a slave in prison, but by evening time was second-in-command over all the land of Egypt. Without God's gift of wisdom in answer to Joseph's prayer, it would not have happened.

Asking for God's help and having faith in his answer made Joseph wiser than anyone else in Egypt.

Thoughts about wisdom

1. What do you think wisdom is?
2. How can we decide that we don't have enough wisdom? What makes us feel that way?
3. Have you ever asked God for wisdom? (Y/N)

4. Do you believe that God answered your prayer?

5. What makes you feel this way? Why do you think he did or did not answer your prayer?

In the New Testament we read of a tricky situation where the Greek-speaking believers thought their widows were not being treated fairly in the daily distribution of food and other help to those who needed it. This was a racial problem between different ethnic groups of believers and needed to be handled carefully and with wisdom. The sensible suggestion made was to select 7 men who were full of God's spirit and very wise with the wisdom that comes from God through his power. One of the men chosen was Stephen and it is said of him that his opponents:

...could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.
Acts 6:10 (ESV)

Learning from ourselves

Think of a difficult situation in which you have found yourself during the last week and answer the following questions about it:

1. Did you handle the situation wisely?

2. Can you think of anything you could have done better?

3. If there were other people involved, did they think you behaved or spoke wisely?

4. Did you ask God for help during the events?

5. Do you think you could handle the situation better if it happened again? Is there anything you can do now to make sure you can?

God is the creator of the universe and his greatness is often mentioned in the Bible. Praying to him is a little like having a personal interview with the Prime Minister of Australia, the Queen of England or the President of the United States – except that those people are much less powerful than God. Asking him for something you want can be a little daunting, particularly if you don't feel very wise! James' instruction to us is that we must have faith when we pray.

2.2 Prayer and faith

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt...

James 1:6

James is still speaking about requests for wisdom, but the same principle extends to all of our prayers to God. Faith is another of the great themes of the Bible and God measures people by their faith – for example, Abraham in Genesis 15:6. Prayer is an area of life where we need particular faith. No one can see God, so most prayer is talking to an invisible listener who does not answer with a voice we can hear, so to pray always requires faith. If you can pray, you have already developed your faith in this practical way. When we pray we show that we believe God exists and listens to us.

A prayer of faith requires one more step of faith as well: when we pray to ask for gifts like wisdom, we must not doubt that God will give us what we ask for. The Bible has many examples of people who showed this sort of faith. They pleased God. There are also many opposite examples where people doubted God and lost out because of it. Of course, not everybody started out having enormous faith; some had to learn through several steps or many years of patient teaching from God. Despite his perfection, God is remarkably patient with us when we fail through weakness. The following table shows some examples in the left column of people who chose not to believe God and were rejected because of it. It also shows examples in the right column of people who chose to trust God and risk their lives as necessary because of that. Some of them took quite a few tries to be able to feel that level of confidence – and God kept trying with them until they won their battle against doubt.

Doubters	Believers
King Saul of Israel – "I saw the people were scattering from me" 1 Samuel 13:8-14. He did not obey a command to wait.	Noah built an ark "just as God commanded him" (Genesis 6:13-22).
King Ahab of Judah – "I will not put the Lord to the test" (Isaiah 7:3-16). God invited him to ask for a sign and he refused to do so.	Rahab said "the LORD your God is God" (Joshua 2:1-21) and helped the spies escape from Jericho. She survived the battle and became an Israelite.
King Zedekiah of Judah – "I am afraid..." Jeremiah 38:17-23. He did not have faith that God would protect him.	Gideon was open to being convinced by God who showed him 3 convincing proofs – two with a fleece (Judges 6:36-40) and one through a dream (Judges 7:8-15).
Pontius Pilate – "What is truth?" John 18:36-40, 19:8-16. He was afraid of the leaders of the Jews and crucified Jesus despite knowing that he was not guilty.	Daniel asked in faith for the interpretation of a dream when the king would not reveal the dream. God showed the dream and its meaning to Daniel (Daniel 2:16-24) who told the king.
Rich young ruler – "He went away sad, because he had great wealth" Mark 10:17-25. Jesus told him to leave all he had and follow, but he could not make the sacrifice.	Peter learned to stand up for Jesus after failing and denying him, and was willing to suffer for Jesus (Acts 3:12-26, 4:1-13).

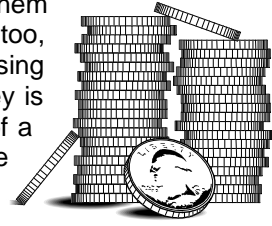
2.3 Humility and Pride

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

James 1:9-10

When you read the Bible, you find that pride is almost always spoken of as bad. This small section in James is one where pride is encouraged in believers – but not pride in their achievements. Believers in poor conditions should take pride in the important position they have been given. This fits well with Jesus' words about poor people rejoicing in the hope of the gospel. Throughout the Old Testament God has much to say about poor people and his care for them and this is a theme that continues through the New Testament also. God gave a message of the hope of a better life and it is particularly attractive to people who do not have a pleasant life now.

Rich believers are to take pride in their unimportant position, which is helping them to learn humility and the transient, temporary nature of life and money. This, too, fits well with Jesus' warnings to rich people that they are in great danger of missing out on the kingdom – much greater danger than poor people are, since money is such a tempting god. Jesus made quite a few comments about the difficulty of a godly life if you are rich. Riches are a security blanket that make us feel we have life under control and don't really need God. Poor people do not have this security blanket and can be more open to properly understanding our need for God.



Pride in God's work and his care for us are the sorts of pride encouraged here by James.

"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

2 Corinthians 10:17

Considering pride

1. In a wealthy society such as Australia, which category do we fall into - rich or poor?
2. What should we take pride in?
3. James encourages us to be proud in unusual ways. Do we show that pride to others? Should we?

2.4 During the next week

2.4.1 Goals

Review your wisdom. Are you happy that you are wise enough? Should you be asking God for more wisdom? Who could you discuss your wisdom with to see if they could help you with any suggestions of areas where they think you are wise and others where you may need to improve?

2.4.2 Thought Provokers

1. James 1:7 describes as 'double-minded' anyone who does not have faith in what they are praying about. What does this mean? Is it fair?
2. Wisdom is praised many times in the Bible, but is not very important in our society. Why does this difference exist?
3. Consider your attitude to money. Is money more important to you than it was to Jesus?
4. Do poor people have as much of a problem with pride as rich people? Try to find passages in the Bible to support your view.
5. In what ways should we be humble? Consider James 4:10, Micah 6:8, Zephaniah 2:3, Philippians 2:3-4 and Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30.

3. TEMPTATION, LISTENING AND RESPONDING

Some of the trials we have to endure come in the form of temptation. There are many kinds of temptations; some we find easy to resist, while some are much harder; some temptations are hard for one person to resist while another finds the same temptation easy to resist. However, the essential lesson to learn is that God never tempts anyone. In this session, we consider

- Temptation and how it leads to sin;
- Where good gifts come from; and
- Listening – and doing!

James continues to warn and encourage his readers in how they should live daily.

3.1 Temptation

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. James 1:13-15 (ESV)

James wants to make a very clear point here; temptation does not come from God, but from within us. It is our own desire that tempts us to sin. The passage also describes a process that can often be seen as we progress from temptation to sin. The steps James mentions are:

1. Temptation produces desire.
2. Desire grows and leads to sin.
3. Sin grows and leads to death.

Sometimes these steps all happen together as we move very quickly from desiring something to sinning. Other times the process is seen more clearly and takes longer. As a simple flow diagram:

Temptation → Desire → Sin → Death

In most cases, there is no obvious connection between any particular sin and the death of a person and our death will normally come many years after our first sin; but the connection between sin and death is inevitable.

A good example of desire and how it led to sin is seen in the following Case Study.

3.1.1 Case Study – King David

David was a very godly man from a very young age – God described him as a man after his own heart. Kings and famous people are often presented almost as gods by their biographers, but the Bible presents people as they really were. David was not perfect and faced a temptation that he did not overcome. We can think about it, not so that we can look down on David in this failure, but so that we can learn how temptation can come about and how easily sin can follow. The full story is told us in 2 Samuel 11 and 12; the table below contains a quick summary with some comments relating the events to the process described in James 1:13-15.

Event	Comments
In spring, the army went out to fight against the Ammonites. David stayed home in Jerusalem.	This was a time "when kings go out to battle", but this year David didn't.
David got up from his couch late one afternoon.	David was normally active, not lying around.
He walked on the roof and saw a beautiful woman (Bathsheba) bathing.	Temptation came and David was dragged away by evil desire and enticed.
He sent messengers to get her.	Evil desire conceived.

Event	Comments
He committed adultery with Bathsheba.	Desire gave birth to sin.
Bathsheba became pregnant.	Consequences of sin.
David tried to cover up his sin.	Sin grew.
David arranged the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah.	Sin kept growing.
God sent Nathan to confront David.	Confession.
The child of David and Bathsheba died.	Sin gave birth to death.

This tragic series of events broke up a marriage, killed a righteous man (Uriah), killed a nameless baby that should never have been conceived, ruined David's wonderful reputation and badly damaged his family. God forgave David his sin, but the consequences haunted him for the rest of his life. It seems that the whole sad story started with laziness; David stayed home instead of going to war, and lay on his bed during the afternoon instead of working to govern the country. Because of this, he was in just the wrong frame of mind to resist the temptation when it came. We can learn about how temptation leads us to sin by looking at how it did with David. Temptation came and David responded with evil desire that he quickly turned into foolish action and then into sin. Later, in an attempt to cover up his sin, he added murder and deception to his sin of adultery.

1. What could David have done to avoid the temptation completely?
2. What could David have done to resist the temptation?
3. In this series of events, what was David's first sin?
4. Once he started sinning, was the rest inevitable? Could David have stopped the series of sins?
5. Why did God send Nathan to David (2 Samuel 12:1-14)? Was it a successful visit?
6. What can we learn from Nathan's visit and how he delivered the message to his king?

3.2 Good gifts come from an unchanging God

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1:17

Sometimes we are given gifts that do not help us at all. Many a sorry smoker has lamented the 'gift' of a cigarette that led him to a life dependent on nicotine. However, gifts from God are always a blessing. Not only that, but all good and perfect gifts come from God.

How do we recognise a 'good and perfect gift'? Are there any basic characteristics that help us to distinguish between good gifts and dangerous temptations? How would you decide if each of the following were gifts from God? Could you be sure?



1. An aged aunt dies and you are left a significant amount of money.
2. You fall and break your leg.
3. You finally feel that you understand a difficult passage you have been struggling with.
4. A friend visits you when you are depressed.
5. After years of suffering you recover from a disease.
6. Your friend is losing her faith in God, and you have the chance to help.
7. You have always got angry with a particular person, but after prayer you eventually find you can have patience with them as they are.

We can rely on God to give us gifts that help us. From the beginning, God has always been a God of life and love. He does not change and his blessings do not change either. There are many examples in the Bible of situations that we are told come from God. For example:

- God gave Solomon wisdom (2 Chronicles 9:23)
- Hebrew midwives in Egypt were given families (Exodus 1:21)
- King Jehoshaphat of Judah had peace with the nations around (2 Chronicles 20:30)
- The chief of the eunuchs had favour and compassion on Daniel (Daniel 1:9-16)
- God has given people who believe in his son Jesus, the right to be God's children (John 1:12)
- Justification of believers as a gift (Romans 3:23-24)

God chose us by his own will and continues to bless us as he chooses.

3.3 Listening and Responding

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James 1:22

It is easy to hear advice, but ignore it. It is simple to read God's commands and continue to break them. It is equally easy to be so busy talking that you never get around to listening at all!

3.3.1 Quick and slow

Many of us would be familiar with the observation that God was trying to teach us a lesson when he gave us two ears and one mouth! James expresses it by telling us that we should be quick to hear but slow to speak. We have probably all been thankful to someone who spoke comforting words to us when we needed them, but often we just wish people would listen to us when we have a problem. Others feel the same as we do, so being quick to hear is important when we interact with others.

James doesn't stop at saying that we should be slow to speak. He also instructs us to be slow to anger, because, he says, the anger of people does not produce the righteousness God requires. James is speaking to Christians and reminding them of their ideals; their desire to be righteous and do the work God wants done. It is easy to forget our ideals and concentrate on the small details of life, but without the ideal of being godly, we start to miss the wood for the trees. If we try to judge everything against the ideal of the righteousness of God we can choose the right actions for the right reasons.

Paul also mentions anger when he writes to Timothy:

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.
1 Timothy 2:8

Anger and arguments do not produce goodness in us, but prayer does. This verse also supports the idea of being quick to hear and slow to speak, because people cannot argue or dispute much with us if we are quick to hear and slow to speak. When we are angry, we often reverse the order James is requiring – we become quick to speak and slow to listen!

3.3.2 Do it!

If we listen to a command we might think we are better than others because we know what is right. However this is just deceiving ourselves. If we don't **obey** the command, are no better off than if we had never heard the command at all.

Jesus spoke of a wise man building his house on a rock and contrasted him with a fool who built his house on sand. When the rain came, the house on the rock stood firm, but the sand washed away from under the house built by the foolish man and his house collapsed. In this parable, the wise man was symbolic of people who heard Jesus' commands and did them.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.
Matthew 7:24

The foolish man is a striking picture of the man who hears Jesus' message, but does not put it into practise. James also paints a picture for us, in James 1:23-24, of a person who hears but does not do. He describes him as being like a man who carefully examines his face in the mirror but as soon as he leaves the mirror, forgets what he looks like. What a waste of time!

When we are told or asked to do anything, we have a choice how we respond. Anger is a common response from people around us, but it is a choice we make. A browbeaten slave will often respond in quite a different way from a proud millionaire, but Jesus chose to respond more like the slave; not as a cowering response to bullying, but through a conscious choice. James says we should

...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you James 1:21

This fits very well with the message of Jesus, who said of himself:

"...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
Matthew 20:28

In the same passage he told his disciples that anyone who wants to be important must practice the attitudes of a slave to learn humility. Jesus set the example of being a servant – he even washed his disciples' dirty feet.

How do we respond when we are told what to do?

Do we respond differently if people ask us nicely? If our response is different, why is it?

Are there any instructions from God that you agree are good, but have never taken up?

3.4 During the next week

We learn by practising and by reviewing our performance. Concentrate on noticing how you respond to temptation. How quickly do you identify it? What is your initial response? Do you resist temptation better when others are around or when you are by yourself? Is temptation easier to resist once you have decided it would be wrong to give in?

Try to think of any of God's commands that you are aware of but that you do not pay attention to. Examine your motives to see why you may be ignoring them and what you can do about it.

3.4.1 Thought provokers

1. In what way are believers a kind of firstfruits of God's creatures? (James 1:18)
2. Is anger ever justified? What can make it right?
3. James says God never tempts us (James 1:13), but he often tests us (see Exodus 16:4, 17:2, 20:20, Judges 2:22). What is the difference between tempting and testing?

4. TRUE RELIGION

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. James 1:27

4.1 Thinking we are religious

Religion relates people to God and is important to many. A Christian is someone who worships the God of the Bible and believes in Jesus as a saviour. Jesus told people who wanted him as a saviour, that they must follow him and live a life that showed their religion. For example:

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Matthew 16:24-28 (ESV)

At the time, Jesus often had to talk to Pharisees and teachers of the law. These men considered themselves very religious and tried to show it to everyone. Jesus told a story about a Pharisee who went up to the temple in Jerusalem and prayed, thanking God that he was not as bad as others were. He thought he was religious, but Jesus said he was only praying to himself.

When he was teaching them how to pray, Jesus warned his disciples about doing things for show. He showed them that there were many people who were hypocrites and prayed in public so that everyone would see them. Disciples of Jesus were to pray in secret.

What the Christian religion **is**:

1. building a closer relationship with God and his son Jesus (John 14:23)
2. becoming like Jesus the Christ (Matthew 10:24-25)

What the Christian religion **is not**:

1. appearing to be religious (Matthew 6:5)
2. what others think of you (John 12:42-43, Ephesians 6:5-6)
3. buildings or churches (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17)



It is easy to think we are religious, but religion is a waste of time if it is not genuine. James insists that if we think we are religious but don't control our tongue, our religion is worthless (James 1:26).

4.2 Pure religion

Sometimes in the Bible we have short and simple definitions, and James provides us with such a passage at the end of James 1 – a definition of true and pure religion against which we can measure ourselves. His explanation shows pure religion to be made up of what we do and what we don't do.

4.2.1 Helping the helpless

A search of the Bible for the words "hospitality" or "hospitable" will show that the words do not occur at all in most versions of the Old Testament. Sometimes people can think that the idea of helping others is a New Testament or Christian idea – but nothing could be further from the truth.

There is a common expression in the books of the Law of Moses: "the alien (meaning foreigners – often refugees), the fatherless and the widow". This collects together three minority groups that would consistently need help from their neighbours to survive. The following table lists some passages where God shows what is important to him and what his requirements for his people were.

Passage	Description
Exodus 22:21, 23:9; Leviticus 19:10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 16:11, 23:7, 24:17-22, 26:12-13, 27:19; Psalm 146:9; Jeremiah 22:3; Malachi 3:5	Welcome and help foreigners living among you
Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 16:11, 24:17-22, 26:12-13, 27:19; Psalm 68:5, 82:3, 146:9; Jeremiah 22:3, Malachi 3:5	Look after widows and orphans
Deuteronomy 14:29, 16:11	Care for Levites and Priests
Deuteronomy 16:11, 24:14-15; Malachi 3:5	Don't oppress servants or slaves
Zechariah 7:10	Don't plot against anyone else
Leviticus 19:15; Psalm 82:3; Jeremiah 22:3	Give justice to the weak, afflicted, destitute, oppressed (equal justice for all)
Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 19:10, 23:22, 25:35; Deuteronomy 15:11	Leave food for the poor and help them
Deuteronomy 5:14	Everyone rests on the Sabbath, not just the rich

A large collection of verses, but they are not all of the verses on each subject. There are also many passages where God points out that his people are mistreating these people and that this is bad.

People often asked Jesus about practical Christianity – how they could know what to do when different situations turned up. Jesus often told them principles of life, and they wanted to know more concrete details. Sometimes they wanted to know how they could avoid what he said and justify themselves! Once Jesus was asked whom God meant in the command that we should love our neighbour as ourself. In response, Jesus told the parable known as the parable of the Good Samaritan, about man who helped a foreigner who had been beaten up and robbed. Samaritans had no dealings and no friendship with Jews, but the Good Samaritan helped a hated foreigner because he needed help.

4.2.2 Case Study – Ruth the Moabitess

Ruth was a widow from the land of Moab who went to Israel with Naomi, her mother-in-law (also a widow) so that she could care for her. In the Law of Moses, God had provided a way for the poor and needy to get food by "gleaning" – collecting the grain dropped during the gathering of the harvest.

"And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God." Leviticus 23:22 (ESV)

While God wanted the poor cared for, they had to work hard for it.

Ruth went out to glean and worked all day. The field she was working in was the field of Boaz, a close relative. Boaz instructed his servants to pull out some of the grain that had been collected and drop it on the ground so that she could collect it. He also helped her in other ways, going well beyond what the law required. The reason he did this was because she had left the false gods of Moab and come to Israel so that she could care for Naomi. Ruth was being helped because she had first chosen to help Naomi. Eventually Ruth and Boaz were married, and their son Obed was the grandfather of King David. If it had not been for Ruth's generosity in caring for Naomi, and Boaz' kindness in caring for Ruth, then there might have been no King David, and thus no Jesus as the Son of David; all of history would have been changed. In the hands of God, a little kindness can go a long way!



Thinking about helping others

When you help others, do you "walk the extra mile" like Boaz or just do what they need right now?

In Australia, the government provides help for the poor. Do individuals still need to help them at all?

4.2.3 Balancing our needs and responsibilities

Many of the people to whom James was writing were poor. Some would have been orphans and widows, yet his words are spoken to them as well. If their religion was genuine, they too had the responsibility to help others. Clearly a very poor person cannot help in the same way as a rich person, but help is not always in the form of money or food. A listening ear, a caring visit, a short note of encouragement; all of these are possible for most of us – even if we are poor or sick. Christianity is a practical faith and we all have opportunities to help others. What we can offer can seem very small, but God is pleased with sacrifices made to help people he loves.

Some ideas to think about in helping others. Can you:

- Write notes to lonely people?
- Visit sick people in their home or in hospital?
- Ring up someone you know to be going through a rough patch?
- Cook a meal for someone struggling physically?
- Buy practical gifts for needy people?
- Help a young widow with their children?
- Borrow books for the elderly from the local library?
- Do some shopping for an old or handicapped person?
- Mow the lawn for an aging neighbour?

Sometimes, it is easy to get caught up with the idea that we are the ones who are in need of help. It is true that at times we will need help, but often we will need help only for a short time after which we can go back to helping others again. Even in times when we are needing and receiving help, we can still be giving to others. Normally there will be others worse off than we are, or needing help in areas that we can assist. Jesus said:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”
Luke 7:38

To sum up the message:

Help poor people. Help widows. Help orphans. Help foreigners. Help your neighbour.

4.2.4 Staying pure

James highlights another aspect of pure religion by including in his definition "keeping oneself from being polluted by the world". Pollution is a common theme nowadays, but only ever in a physical sense. Human activities cause lots of pollution and contamination of the environment, but James is concentrating on spiritual pollution of the people themselves.

It is said that one litre of oil can contaminate up to 1 million litres of water and we can learn important lessons from this in our Christian life. Paul uses the picture of the working of yeast to describe how we can be stopped from obeying the truth:

A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. Galatians 5:9

Small amounts of spiritual contamination in our mind can spread and badly damage our commitment to God. Paul reminds us that our body is a temple of God's Holy Spirit and must be looked after:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (ESV)

So what must we keep ourselves from being polluted by? In the world around us, pollution occurs when the environment is dirtied and damaged by something that should not be there. This will often reduce or destroy the natural beauty of the surroundings. The damage can take a long time to repair. In the same way, we want our minds to be a temple for God – holy, pure and clean. To maintain this, we must avoid the pollution that surrounds us in a world that prefers evil to good. Newspapers, books, TV, videos, magazines, radio and CDs all have many things that go against God. God does not want us polluted with these ideas, instead he says:

...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if there is anything excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.
Philippians 4:8

Paul also emphasises that, although we live in the world, we must also be separate from it in some ways:

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."
2 Corinthians 6:16-18 (ESV)

1.5 During the next week

Try to measure how genuine your religion is.

- Do you keep a tight rein on your tongue?
- How many others have you helped in the last week?
- How many others have helped you in the last week?
- Do you keep your spiritual clothes clean – or are they spotted with dirt?

1.5.1 Thought provokers

1. Should we help people other than those who are widows and orphans?
2. Under the Law of Moses, God often put the responsibility of looking after the poor onto individuals instead of "the government". How do you think this would change the popular attitude to poor people these days?
3. James 1:27 only discusses behaviour. Is doctrine or belief important? You may wish to consider the following passages: Acts 4:10-12, Matthew 15:9, 2 Corinthians 4:2, 1 Timothy 6:2-6, John 4:22-24, Galatians 1:8-11, 1 Timothy 1:3-11, 2 John 10-11.
4. In Australia, government assistance is often given to the needy without requiring any effort from those receiving the help. Why do you think God chose to do it differently in the Law of Moses?

5. FAVOURITISM

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism.
James 2:1

"Favouritism" or "partiality" is favouring or preferring someone because of their position in society, their wealth or some other feature that should not be a basis for preference.

Favouritism should not be confused with being selective. The difference is most easily shown with an example. Imagine you are selecting a team to compete in the Olympics' basketball competition. If you choose people based on their skill at basketball, you are selecting the best people for the job; this is not favouritism. If, however, you appointed people to the team because you knew them or their family or because they were rich or even because they were related to you, this would be favouritism.

5.1 God and favouritism

God does not show favouritism, but he does treat people in different ways on their attitude to him. In the book of Acts, the preaching of the gospel started with the Jews. In his faithfulness to people he loves, God had decided that the good news should be presented to the people of Israel first. We need to remember that the nation of Israel came from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – all faithful men who served God and were loved by God. Through the history of Israel there were many faithful men and women who looked for God, as their ancestors had done, and God was faithful to them also. Overall, the Jewish nation did not serve God, and the captivities to Assyria and Babylon were God's punishment for their faithlessness. But still, God remains faithful to his friends and their descendants, so Jesus was sent first to the Jews as his chosen nation. Moses explained to the Israelites:

"Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands."
Deuteronomy 7:9

To some extent, the Jews were God's family on earth and he sent his son to them to help them. Jesus came to speak to the Jews – they were to be the first to receive his good news because of God's ongoing love for their ancestors. This was God's reward for the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and many others. Throughout this time, when God wanted to help faithful people of other nations, he did so by bringing them to the Jews. Imagine you had a child who was travelling to another country and you had a good friend who lived in that country. You would make sure that your child would be able to contact your friend when they arrived so that they would receive as much help as possible. In the same way, God brought people like Ruth the Moabitess to Israel to learn about him.

The preference God showed for Israel was based on his love and faithfulness – God does not change like shifting shadows and continues his blessing of righteous people even after their death, by looking after their children. But there are limits to this. God does not show favouritism and so the gospel was given to non-Jews as well after it was first presented to the Jews.

5.2 Jesus and favouritism

Jesus spoke almost exclusively to Jews and offered them the good news first. He was criticised by the important people because he spoke with "tax collectors and sinners". Such people often came to Jesus and were welcomed by him with the same attention as he welcomed rich or powerful people who visited him. Of course, some people who did not like his message came just to try to trap him in his words. He welcomed people from the following groups in society who came to see him:

- fishermen,
- tax collectors,
- Pharisees and Sadducees,
- Roman centurions,
- Samaritans,
- sinful women (possibly prostitutes),
- children,
- rulers of synagogues, and
- many others.

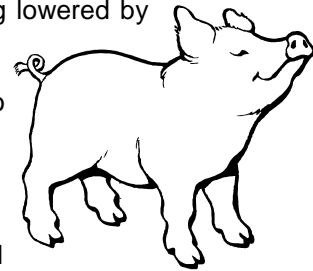
Any who wished to follow God's commands were welcome to come to him and all were given the benefit of his time and his words. When criticised for going to the home of a tax collector, he said he had come to search out and save the lost (Luke 19:9-10). Even those who came to trap him were given words to think about and a chance to change their attitudes.

5.3 Favouritism and preaching

After Jesus went into heaven, the apostles continued to preach to Jews, but God had plans for them to preach to Gentiles also.

5.3.1 Peter's vision

Peter was sent a vision (recorded in Acts 10:9-17) of a large sheet being lowered by the four corners and full of all sorts of animals, reptiles and birds that were labelled 'unclean' by the law of Moses and could not be eaten. In the vision, he was told to kill and eat these things which he would not do because they were unclean. He was told that what God had made clean he should not call unclean. This happened three times and the vision ended with the sheet being taken up into heaven again. Peter could not understand what it meant, but God had arranged events so that at the same time, messengers arrived from a Gentile who worshipped God and needed to hear about the gospel of Jesus. Finally, Peter was able to understand that God was teaching him not to show favouritism; he was to preach to Gentiles as well as Jews.



So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Acts 10:34-35

5.3.2 Preaching to the Gentiles

This lesson was learned by the believers and from then on they were willing to preach to Gentiles, particularly when the Jews would not listen. For example, in Antioch

...Paul and Barnabas answered [the Jews] boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles."

Acts 13:46

God's willingness to offer eternal life to Gentiles as well as Jews teaches us some lessons about partiality – God does not show favouritism, but he does reward faithfulness. In one of Jesus' parables, telling of some servants given money to look after while their master was away, he tells of the master's pleasure with servants who looked after the money well and says to one of them:

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Matthew 25:21

This teaches us how God will reward people who are faithful to him in this time.

5.4 Favouritism and us

In this small but compelling book, James insists that we should not show favouritism either. For believers in Jesus, partiality is out of bounds because it is unjust – and it causes so much trouble.

When we look around us in the world, we see partiality in many places. For example you might see:

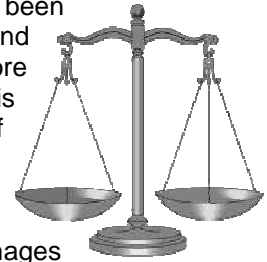
- rich people appointed to important jobs because of their riches instead of their skill,
- sportsmen given community awards because of their sporting prowess rather than their good character, or
- help given to some in society because of their race rather than any particular need.

In the Old Testament, God told his people Israel that judgement had to be fair, based on law and evidence. Rich people were not to be listened to more because they were rich and powerful, and poor

people were not to be favoured because they were poor. Judgement was always to be just. One example of God's requirements is:

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.
Leviticus 19:15

It is fascinating that God mentions partiality in both directions. There have been times in world history where poor people have been preferred over rich people and been favoured in courts whether they were guilty or not. However, the far more common problem through history has been favoured treatment of the rich. This is normally connected with bribery where someone with money can buy the sort of justice they want. There are many places in the world where this is normal and where bribery is required even to get justice. When bribery is normal in a society, justice is no longer available to all – facts don't matter as much as money and the social importance of people. This is partiality and damages individuals and destroys a society. God told Moses:



Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.
Deuteronomy 16:19

Partiality and favouritism have been a problem throughout history. James tells a story of where partiality could easily be shown; a rich man comes into their congregation and is welcomed and paid attention to. A poor man also comes and is ignored or told roughly to sit on the floor. Why does this happen? Why are rich people more attractive to us than poor people? It is hard to come to any other conclusion than that we love money, power and importance. Why else would we be attracted to rich and powerful people? It is not the rich who necessarily have the most attractive personalities or a good sense of humour. James reminds his readers that it is rich people who oppress them and ridiculed Jesus.

If you visit many large churches, you will find special areas set apart for certain families or individuals that have donated large amounts of money to the church. So even in the church, where God has given us warnings against favouritism, favouritism is still alive and well.

As we saw in the previous session when looking at pure religion, poor people are important to God and favouritism of this sort dishonours and insults poor people. Again, James reminds his readers:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?
James 2:5

In many ways, the rich have their pleasure in the comforts of this life and few rich people can see clearly their need for God or learn the humility he wants. Poor people can see the advantages of God's kingdom because they have so little now.

So let's sum up then: should we show favouritism? No! It is wrong:

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.
James 2:9

5.5 During the next week

Think about how you respond to people. Do you respond differently based on

1. the way they dress?
2. how they look?
3. whether they speak your language?
4. how smart they are?
5. what family they come from?
6. how famous they are or who they know?
7. how much money they have?

Now try to decide if your responses are showing partiality. If you decide they are, what practical steps can you take to change this? How do we get rid of partiality?

5.5.1 Thought provokers

1. God sometimes does not punish people because of the faithfulness of their father. One example is in 1 Kings 11:9-13 where God did not punish Solomon as he deserved. Is this showing partiality?
2. Do the laws of our country show partiality to some groups in society? Does it matter?
3. How can a church show favouritism today? Will it always be about wealth?
4. If you help the child of a believer because you know their parents were righteous people, is this favouritism?
5. What sorts of problems are caused by partiality or favouritism:
 - in a family?
 - at work?
 - in a church?
 - in society?

6. THE ROYAL LAW AND MERCY

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right.
James 2:8

God wants us to show love to those around us and in doing so we show mercy too. This session will look at the so-called "Royal Law" – "Love your neighbour as yourself" – and when and how we should show mercy.

6.1 Love

If we must love our neighbour as ourselves, we may first have to answer the questions in our minds – 'Who is my neighbour?' and 'What is love?'

6.1.1 Who is my neighbour?

Jesus repeated what God had said centuries before, through Moses: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. A scribe, hearing this, came to him wanting to justify himself rather than listen to Jesus' instruction. He therefore asked, "And who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29). Jesus replied, as he so often did, with a story. We usually call it 'The Good Samaritan'. The story is of a man who was attacked by robbers and left to die. The passing priest and Levite, both religious leaders, should have been the ones to help this poor man, but they didn't. In fact it was a despised Samaritan who took pity on him, bandaged his wounds and took him on his donkey to an inn and paid for his care. Turning to the expert in the law, Jesus asked who the neighbour in this story was. The answer – the one who had mercy on him. The important point was Jesus' final one: "Go and do likewise". We too must show this self-sacrificing love. God wants us to show love to those around us and in doing so we show mercy too.



6.1.2 What is love?

There is a beautiful chapter – 1 Corinthians 13 – that tells us a lot about love. It is a good chapter to learn and try to put into practice in our lives. The passage shows that love is a choice of how to act rather than a warm, emotional feeling inside. In other words we can love those who we feel we don't like for some reason.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Reading the words above we find that love is really a "doing" word, not just a "feeling" word. If we truly love someone, we show patience towards them, we are not rude to them, we try to do the best for them.

6.1.3 Who do we have to love?

As we have seen from Jesus' parable, we have to love our neighbour – anyone who needs our care. Don't you think that would include everyone? Jesus goes as far as to say that we should even love our enemies.

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, don't demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.
Luke 6:27-31

Does that sound easy? Just wait until next time somebody treats you in a way you don't like! What is your natural reaction? Jesus calls us to something far higher than our natural reaction – we need to actively develop love shown by action in our lives.

... let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:18

6.1.4 Why do we have to love?

John wrote

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

Jesus also gave the commandment to love our neighbour, so to be Christians we must!

6.1.5 Love shows in mercy

Person	The love and mercy they showed
Abraham	When Abraham's herdsmen quarrelled with the herdsmen of his nephew Lot, they decided to separate. He allowed Lot to choose whether he would have the well watered or the barren area to live in. Genesis 13
Joseph	Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery in Egypt, but years later when he was made an important ruler, he chose to forgive his brothers, and did not punish them for what they had done. Genesis 45
Moses	The rebellious Israelites built a golden calf to worship instead of worshipping the Lord their God. God wanted to destroy them all and make a nation from Moses, but Moses interceded and God did not kill the Israelites. Exodus 32:9-14
David	Twice, when being chased by King Saul, David was in a position when he could have killed Saul. However each time he chose not to do this, saying that Saul was God's anointed. 1 Samuel 24 and 26
Jesus	When a blind man called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and healed him. Luke 18:35-43
Barnabas	John Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, but had left before the conclusion. When Paul didn't want to take this man on the next journey, Barnabas decided to give him another chance. Acts 15:36-39

6.2 Mercy

...judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! James 2:13

Mercy can be defined as showing kindness to someone who is in your power – not applying punishment when it is deserved.

6.2.1 Why show mercy?

The prophet Micah said:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

This is what God **requires** of us. Micah later says that God delights to show mercy (Micah 7:18). That is what he is like, and what he wants us to be like. In fact he even gives a reward for those who show mercy. Jesus said

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Matthew 5:7

Isn't that what we all need – to be shown mercy? Because we sin, we need God's mercy if we want his salvation. We need to play our part and show mercy to others too.

Jesus said,

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful

Luke 6:36

Paul, writing to Timothy, said

...I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life

1 Timothy 1:16

God has set the example for us to follow – he has shown mercy to us and wants us to show mercy to others also. Without God's mercy, we have no hope of salvation, no hope of life forever. We must respond positively to this by showing God's love and mercy to those around us.

6.2.2 How and when should we show mercy?

Just as Jesus spoke of the good Samaritan who helped the man he happened to meet in the course of his everyday life, we too can show love and mercy to any we meet who need our help. We might be asked for help, or we may notice somebody who looks like they need help. Either way we should do our best to care. If we are to show mercy and offer help to people who we may never have met before, how much more should we do so to people we know? Jesus said:

And if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.

Matthew 10:42

6.2.3 Are there times when we shouldn't be merciful?

God is a merciful God and we should aim to copy him in this. However we must realise that there are times when God will not show mercy. In Exodus 34:6-7 we read of the time when God proclaimed his character to Moses. He said:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.

Exodus 34:6-7

For us, however, we do not have the knowledge or judgement of God to be able to decide when mercy should be shown and when it should not. For us, mercy should be shown in all cases unless there is a specific instruction from God. We find one of these in one of John's letters

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

2 John 1:10-11

There are very few of these cases and they mostly relate to how we should treat people who try to lead others astray or to stir up arguments. These seem to be cases where showing mercy to such people would be not showing love and mercy to all the people to whom they would cause trouble. Our basic rule for living must be to show mercy in all except these special cases. Even in these cases, as soon as there is repentance, we must be willing to forgive.

6.2.4 Case Study – the unforgiving servant

Jesus told another story to illustrate the idea of mercy and forgiveness. We read it in Matthew 18:23-35. A servant has a huge debt owing to the king of the country and cannot pay. When he begs for more time, the king shows him amazing mercy and cancels the debt! Imagine how the servant feels now – so free and happy. The debt would have weighed him down, but now it is gone. However as he goes out from the king, he meets a man who owes him a much smaller amount of money but cannot pay. He abuses the other man and throws him into prison until he can pay the debt. When the king hears of this he is angry and imprisons the unforgiving servant.



As with all of Jesus' parables, the important point is the lesson it teaches:

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. Matthew 18:35

6.3 During the next week

1. Notice the people you meet during the next week.
 - Who do you think needs your love?
 - Are you willing to give it?
 - If you fail to help somebody, think how you could do better next time.
2. A list of characteristics of love from 1 Corinthians 13 to measure yourself against during the week:
 - Love is patient and kind;
 - Love does not envy or boast;
 - Love is not arrogant or rude.
 - Love does not insist on its own way;
 - Love is not irritable or resentful;
 - Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.
 - Love bears all things,
 - Love believes all things,
 - Love hopes all things,
 - Love endures all things.
3. What is your reaction to others when they do something unkind to you? Try to notice your natural response this week and aim to forgive and show God's mercy to them. Remember Jesus' comment to Peter (Matthew 18:21-22) that he should forgive his brother seventy times seven (490) times (some versions say seventy seven times).

6.3.1 Thought provokers

1. When you care for others and give them help, often they ask for more help. Does this encourage you to be a better neighbour or does it put you off helping in case you are called on to show more love and caring?

The Bible is full of people who tried to obey God and put their faith into action. There are also many examples of people who didn't do what was right. Both the 'good' people and the wicked are written about as examples for us (1 Corinthians 10:6). They are there for us to learn from.

2. Find three people in the Bible who you think are good examples of people who showed mercy in their lives. With these in mind, think about the following questions:
 - Do you think they were naturally merciful?
 - Do you see any signs of change in their lives?
 - What steps did they take to make sure they were merciful?
3. Find three people in the Bible who didn't show mercy (either on one occasion, or throughout their lives). Consider these questions with these people in mind:
 - What did their mercilessness lead to?
 - How did others respond to them?
 - Can you find what God thought of them?

7. FAITH AND DEEDS

James shows in his letter that faith without deeds is dead! Although having faith is essential for a Christian to please God, it is useless if it does not make us do something.

...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. James 2:17

7.1 What is faith?

Hebrews 11 is a chapter devoted to faith. Many Old Testament characters who showed great faith are mentioned as examples to all believers. The chapter begins with a definition of faith:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
Hebrews 11:1

Having defined faith, the chapter also tells us that faith is very important – essential in fact!

...without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6

Some of what must follow from faith is included in this verse where we are assured that God rewards those who 'earnestly seek' him. Earnest seeking is more than just thinking faithful thoughts. Imagine a child is lost. It is important to think about where they might be, but you also need to go out and search carefully. James discusses this determined searching for God – the actions prompted by faith.

7.2 Faith on its own is useless

Although faith is necessary to please God, James explains why it is not enough on its own.

7.2.1 James' first example

Read James 2:15-16 and try to imagine the scene. You meet a friend on a cold winter's day and notice that he doesn't have a warm coat on. In fact, he is only wearing a threadbare singlet and some old shorts, and is shivering. What good would it be if you said, "Have a good day – keep warm! See you later...", and waved goodbye to him? Surely you would invite him home and find some warm clothes for him to put on. Again, imagine if a lady came to your door and it was clear that she was starving. You could see the bones in her arms so easily. What good would it do her if you said "I hope your week is pleasant – enjoy plenty of good food"? James concludes his example with the comment "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17).

7.3 Trees and their fruit

A few times in the New Testament, people are likened to trees. John the Baptist told people who came to be baptised that they must produce fruit that fitted in with repentance (Matthew 3:8). In Matthew 7:15-20 Jesus said that we can tell what sort of person somebody is by the sorts of 'fruit' they grow.

When we look at a fruit tree, we can see what type of tree it is by the fruit it grows. Are the apples on the apple tree good or blemished? Does that pear tree have pears full of disease or perfect pears?

In Galatians 5, Paul talks about the fruit of the spirit – good things from God shown in the life of believers. His list of characteristics includes many things we can only show if we have control over our tongue.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

7.4 A foolish argument against the importance of deeds

James portrays somebody arguing against his statement that faith without deeds is dead. This person says "you have faith; I have deeds", as if having either on their own would be okay. James challenges this imaginary person to show his faith without deeds. How can you do that? It seems obvious that we can only show by doing – thinking does not show at all until it is shown in how it affects what we do. To sum up, James says

I will show you my faith by what I do.

James 2:18

He calls this imaginary person who claims to have faith without any works, a "foolish man", and goes on to give evidence that faith and deeds work together. Let's look at his evidence in two case studies.

7.5 Case Study – Faithful Abraham

About 2000 BC a man called Abraham lived in a city called Ur, situated near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the area of modern-day Iraq. This city was full of idolatry and wickedness and God told Abraham to leave Ur and go on a long journey where God directed him. Abraham did what he was commanded because he had faith – he was certain of what he hoped for. Many years later he had a son, Isaac, born in a miraculous way, since his wife Sarah was much too old to have a child. Imagine Abraham's feelings when God asked him to take his only son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice. Yet he still believed that God was able to raise his son from the dead (Hebrews 11:19) and he had complete confidence that God knew best. He rose early in the morning and went with Isaac to the mountain God had indicated and prepared to offer his son. God, however, was only testing Abraham to see if he would trust him, and sent an angel to stop him from killing Isaac. Instead God provided a ram, caught in a nearby thicket, to offer as a sacrifice. This is the incident James uses to illustrate the necessity of having actions to accompany faith. If Abraham had stayed at home with Isaac, he wouldn't have shown God that he relied on him and trusted his commands and obeyed them. Without his deeds, Abraham's faith would have been dead. The important conclusion was



...his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he didYou see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

James 2:22, 24

7.6 Case Study – Faithful Rahab

Rahab was not an Israelite. She was a Canaanite and a prostitute. Living about 1400 years before Christ, this woman was not the sort you would expect to be a woman of faith. Yet James uses her as an example of somebody who was considered righteous by God! You see, Rahab lived in Jericho, the first city in Canaan to be defeated by the Israelites. She had heard the stories of the miracles the God of the Israelites had done in Egypt. She might have heard of the way their God had cared for his people for forty years in the wilderness, giving them food and drink in miraculous ways. What she had heard convinced her that here was the real God. She had faith in him. Now if she had stopped at that, she would have died with the rest of the people in Jericho when the walls fell down at God's command. Not only would her faith have been dead, but she would have been dead too! However, when the Israelite spies came to search out the city, she hid them, cared for them, and arranged their escape, lowering them out of her window to freedom, since her house was part of the wall. While doing so, she organised a sign – a red cord in her window – that left her house miraculously standing when the rest of the city wall toppled. God was pleased with Rahab and considered her faith, and the actions that went with it, to be righteousness. The conclusion from James was

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. James 2:26

7.7 Other people of faith in the Bible

The Bible is full of people who showed faith in their lives. Hebrews 11 records some of them, but there are many others too. Here are some:

Name of person	Faithful actions
Noah	Believed God that there would be a destructive flood and built an ark to save his family and many animals.
Moses' parents	Hid their baby son Moses when the king of Egypt had ordered all male Israelite babies to be killed. They put him in a basket in the river, trusting God to care for him.
Gideon	Fought an army of 135,000 with only 300 men, having followed God's instructions for choosing the men. They won!
David	Fought Goliath, the champion Philistine who was a giant. Although Goliath was heavily armed, David killed him with a sling and a single stone.
Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego	Would not bow down to a golden image, although the punishment was for them to be thrown into a burning fiery furnace. God sent an angel to rescue them and they were unharmed.
Daniel	Was willing to be put in a den of lions as punishment for praying to his God. God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths.
Peter	Walked on water to meet Jesus. When his faith wavered he started to sink, but only after he had walked on water for a while!
Stephen	Was stoned to death for what he believed and taught, but had faith that he would be raised from the dead. He will be, when Jesus returns!

Can you think of more people of faith mentioned in the Bible?

What sort of tree are you?

What 'fruit' do you display in your life?

List some of your actions that stem from your faith in God.

7.8 Will works save you?

Works will not save you, as Paul told believers in Ephesus:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:8-10

Instead, we are saved through our faith. However, we have seen that faith without deeds is dead. It is useless. So your works, your deeds, are absolutely necessary, as they show your living faith. In fact God has already prepared good works for you to do, as seen in the verses above. Think about that for a minute. The almighty creator of heaven and earth has already prepared many things that he wants **you** to do throughout your life! Does that make you feel important, or humble? What do you think your response to it should be? Take time to consider these questions and then **ACT!**

7.9 During the next week

Plan to do good deeds to put your faith into action in the coming week. Think about who needs your help today or tomorrow. Don't forget that the gift of your time is often more precious than the gift of your money, though both can be valuable. If you don't make plans of this sort, you may well miss the opportunity to do the deeds God has prepared for you to do.

Good deeds can be done for many reasons. Consider your motives. Why do you do good deeds? Is it to look good? Is it to earn salvation? Do you wish to please God? Do you have some other reason?

Events that surprise us can also catch us out. We can be so busy concentrating on our plans that we miss a passing opportunity. Imagine the difference if the good Samaritan had absent-mindedly walked past the battered traveller because he was busy thinking of what he would do in Jericho when he arrived!

7.9.1 Thought provokers

Consider the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the best example of someone who was always giving of himself for others. He made the supreme sacrifice – he gave his life for us. Christians are followers of Christ. We are meant to follow in his footsteps and copy his actions. Do you? Jesus said:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.
John 15:12-14

1. How do you feel when you have helped somebody? Does this encourage you to do more helping?
2. How do you feel when you deliberately decide to ignore somebody who needs your help? How do you think they feel?
3. In what way do your good deeds show your faith? What sort of an example do you show to others? Could somebody look at what you do in life and guess that you must be a Christian?
4. Since faith cannot save without works, and works cannot save without faith, how do we know if we are getting the balance right?
5. It has been said that faith cannot help doing good works constantly. If we find ourself not doing many good works, does this mean our faith is failing? How can we tell if our faith is healthy? Are there any simple indicators we can use?
6. Jesus said that if we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, we will be able to tell a mountain to move and it will (Matthew 17:20). Do we need to perform miracles like this to show we have faith? Did Jesus ever move mountains? Was he speaking figuratively?

8. TAMING THE TONGUE

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. James 3:9-10

The tongue – a little part of our body, necessary for speech – is described by James as a restless evil, full of deadly poison! That is extreme language. In this session we will look at the good and the evil our tongues can do, and try to find some ways to learn to control this small thing.

8.1 The newspaper boy

Once, there were two men travelling home from work together, as was their custom. As they waited for the train, a boy walked past selling newspapers and one of the men gave the boy enough money for a paper, as he did every day. The boy snatched the money, threw him the newspaper and hurried off without a word. The man called out his thanks, but there was no response. As the men climbed onto the train, the other man said, "He is rude to you every time! Why are you always so polite to him?" His friend answered "I think it is important to be polite, so why should I let my behaviour be controlled by someone else?"

How we use our tongues is a choice we make and we can never blame others for what we say. Yet we often hear people say "He made me mad". We choose to respond in that way!

8.2 Is it possible to tame the tongue?

James says:

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. James 3:7-8

How does that make you feel? Does it make you want to give up trying to control your speech before you even start? Or do you want to beat it and prove James wrong? We are given many instructions and much wise advice about our use of speech. It is clear that followers of Jesus Christ need to aim high. They need to work towards perfection. This is just as necessary in the use of the tongue as in other parts of their lives.

Uses of the tongue	Examples of people who did this
Praising God	Peter and John healed a cripple and his response was to walk, leap and praise God. See Acts 3:1-10.
Cursing God	Job used to sacrifice a burnt offering for his children after they had been feasting just in case they had sinned and cursed God. See Job 1:5.
Cursing people	When his son Absalom rebelled against him, King David fled from Jerusalem. A man named Shimei threw stones at him and cursed him. See 2 Samuel 16:5-14.
Thankfulness	Hannah could not have children. When God answered her prayer asking for God to give her a child she prayed again – a prayer of joy and thankfulness. See 1 Samuel 2:1-10.
Blaming others	After they sinned in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve each blamed others for what they had done. See Genesis 3:12-13.
Telling the truth	A woman had been bleeding for twelve years. In faith she touched Jesus' clothes and was healed. Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" and she finally came forward and told the truth. Jesus said, "Go in peace". See Mark 5:24-34.
Lying	Ananias and Sapphira were first century believers who sold some property and gave part of the money to the apostles. They lied and claimed they had given all the money. God killed them both. See the case study below and Acts 5:1-11.

Uses of the tongue	Examples of people who did this
Deceiving	Jacob pretended he was Esau (his brother) to gain a special blessing from his father. When questioned by his blind father Isaac, Jacob said he was Esau. See Genesis 27:24.
Kindness	Boaz spoke kindly to Ruth when he heard how kind she had been in looking after her mother-in-law Naomi. See Ruth 2:8-13.
Gossiping	After Jesus' resurrection, Peter asked what was to happen to John, another of Jesus' disciples. Instead of saying "mind your own business", Jesus said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?". Therefore a rumour spread that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus hadn't said John wouldn't die. See John 21:20-23.

Looking at the table above, you'll see that our tongues can be used for good or evil. Aim to use yours for good! Remember what we learnt in previous lessons:

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...
James 1:19

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.
James 1:26

8.3 Case Study – Ananias and Sapphira: using their tongues to lie!

Ananias and his wife Sapphira were believers in the church in Jerusalem. Those in the church at that time shared their possessions with each other, so this couple decided to sell a piece of property and give the money to the apostles. However they also decided together to only give part of the money, but pretend that it was all the money. When Ananias brought the money to Peter, Peter said he had lied to the Holy Spirit. He explained that Ananias was allowed to keep some of the money – that was not the sin. The sin was in the deception he practised. He had used his mouth to lie, and suffered the consequences – he fell down and died. His wife, Sapphira was given a chance to tell the truth too, when she was called in about three hours later. However she also failed the test, and lied to Peter about the price they had received for the land. Likewise she had to suffer the consequences – instant death. This story is in Acts 5:1-11. We don't usually get this sort of instant punishment for the wrong use of our tongues, but if we continue to sin in this way with no repentance, we will end up dead eternally. It is important how we use our tongues!



8.4 Case Study – David and Abigail: using the tongue for good!

David was running away from King Saul and hiding with hundreds of men wherever he could. At one stage he needed food, and asked for supplies from a man called Nabal, a wealthy man with many sheep and goats. Now David's men had helped to protect this man's animals in the past, so David thought it reasonable to ask him for help. However, Nabal refused to give assistance and sent an insulting message to David. David was furious and prepared to take about 400 men to get revenge. Nabal's wife Abigail was a wise woman. When she heard from the servants the message Nabal had sent to David, she knew she must act quickly as she guessed David would be very angry. Gathering some supplies she hurried to meet David and spoke wise words to him. She said "My Lord, let the blame be on me alone..." Was it really her fault? Not at all! But she turned his wrath into repentance. He suddenly realised that he was about to kill all the men of Nabal when it was only Nabal who was being nasty. David said, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request." Her wise tongue saved lives and made peace. The account of this story is in 1 Samuel 25. Jesus praised people like this when he said:



Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Matthew 5:9

When you make peace with your tongue, you are working as God's children.

8.5 Our tongues hold the power of good and harm

The two case studies above show us the power of the tongue – the power of what we say. In one case what was said led to death and in the other case it led to life. Imagine what would have happened if Ananias and Sapphira had said that they were offering only part of the money resulting from the sale of the land. These two believers would not have died in such a dramatic way. Or imagine if Abigail had come to David and said, “Why do you think we should give you food, you rascal?”. There would presumably have been a number of dead bodies as a result. Such a small part of our body – the tongue – yet so powerful.

You can see why the wise man Solomon wrote the following words of advice for us in the book of Proverbs:

He who guards his lips guards his soul, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.
Proverbs 13:3

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1

James likens the tongue to other small but powerful things:

- A bit in the mouth of a horse.
- A rudder on a large boat.
- A fire started by a spark.

Think about each of these examples. A bit in the horse's mouth can be used to guide a horse the right way. However horse thieves can also use it as they steal the horse. A rudder is used to guide a ship through narrow places, but could be turned to run the ship onto the rocks. A fire, started by a spark, can be used to cook a meal or to burn down a barn. Small – yes! Powerful – certainly!

8.6 Our great example – Jesus

The example of the Lord Jesus Christ is the very best example because he did not sin and he did have control over his tongue:

...Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.
“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” 1 Peter 2:21-22

So how did he use his tongue?

- He spoke words of kindness. When he raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead, the first thing he said was to give her something to eat.
- He spoke words of truth. Many times he said “Truly, truly I say to you”.
- He spoke words of encouragement. When Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had died he said, “your brother will rise again”.
- He spoke words of wisdom. When challenged by the rulers with a question, he often replied with a further question which the questioners could not answer.
- He even spoke words of rebuke – but only when necessary. He denounced the scribes and Pharisees, calling them hypocrites, when they continued to reject his message of truth for selfish reasons. Their desire for money and power were much stronger than their desire for truth, but they pretended to oppose him for religious reasons. This is hypocrisy.

So you can see that there is a lot for us to copy!

8.7 During the next week

Pay special attention to how you speak to others, or ask a good friend to tell you! Think where you need to change your speech. The list below may help:

- Do I swear or blaspheme?
- Do I often speak angrily rather than patiently and kindly?
- Do I talk unkindly about others behind their back (gossip)?
- Do I tell lies?
- Do I blame others when things go wrong?
- Do I deliberately deceive others?
- Do I complain too much?
- Is there any other way in which I don't use my tongue for good?

These are just some ideas to get you started. Try not to feel too "down" if your tongue is full of these things at the moment. God is looking for change in you, but he knows it won't all happen overnight.

Choose an area where you fail and set a goal for improvement. Be specific. You may find it helpful to search out a verse from the Bible that encourages you to do better in this area. Write it on a piece of paper and stick it in a prominent place, such as on your mirror. For example, if you swear a lot you might write out:

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other. Colossians 3:8-9.

Think ahead to events that prompt you to swear, so that you are especially vigilant at those times. Pray to God for help in overcoming this sin. Aim to go for an hour without swearing; then a morning; then a day. When you resist the temptation, give a quick prayer of thanks. If you do swear, immediately ask God for forgiveness and for his help again. If somebody is listening, you could apologise to them so that others are aware that you are trying to change. This can be quite difficult to do, but may help in achieving your goal.

Remember to notice areas where you already use your tongue in a way which will please God and continue to do them. It is no good improving in one area of your speech while going backwards in other aspects where you already use your tongue in a Godly way!

8.7.1 Thought provokers

1. Read Joshua 2:1-7. Rahab told lies to the messengers of Jericho who were searching for the Israelite spies whom she had hidden on her roof under the flax. She said they had already left the city. This was a lie but achieved what God wanted with the spies.

Was this use of her tongue wrong?

Can you think of any other way she could have saved the spies without telling a lie?

2. When somebody tells you about the troubles that a friend is facing it could either be passing on valuable news or gossiping. How can you decide which it is?

What should you say if you think it is gossip?

3. We are told in Proverbs 15:1 that a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Is this always true?

Can you think of any cases when a gentle answer has made somebody angrier?

What could you do if an angry person becomes even angrier?

9. USING OUR TONGUE

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.
James 3:7-8

What a serious charge this is! James tells us that without God's help, we can never control our tongue. And if we can't control it, we will do more harm than good with this small organ of the body.

An example of the damage that can be done with the tongue is shown in the effects of gossip. James doesn't mention gossip specifically, but it is one of the damaging uses of the tongue with which we are all familiar.

9.1 Gossip

Gossip is the telling of idle, useless or malicious tales. Normally gossip involves telling such tales about others behind their backs. The retelling of news is not gossip, but sometimes there is a fine line between retelling news and gossiping. Gossip is a problem for everyone because we all like to hear news and tell it to others - particularly "juicy" news.

The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.
Proverbs 18:8

God says nothing good about gossip. In Proverbs Solomon tells us

...a gossip separates close friends
Proverbs 16:28

If we love our neighbours, we will not tell stories about them or betray their trust. Jesus told us to do to others the things we would like them to do to us (Matthew 7:12) which immediately demands that we stop gossiping. No-one likes to be the subject of gossip or rumours. Rumours can badly damage a person's reputation and the damage can last for years.

9.1.1 How to avoid gossip

When recounting information about someone else, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I certain the facts are correct?
If not, do not pass it on, particularly if it isn't complimentary or helpful.
2. Have I checked with the person (or people) involved?
If not, you may have the facts correct, but not the motives or intentions. Your understanding of the details may not be complete. Do not pass it on.
3. Was this information given in confidence?
Confidences must remain confidences if friends are to remain friends. Do not pass it on.
4. Am I recounting this story or information to help build others up in Christ?
If not, don't continue (see Ephesians 4:29).

When listening to stories about others, you may also need to ask people to stop telling the stories. Asking the questions above may also be appropriate before allowing the details to come out. If you have heard information about other people or groups of people, you may have listened to helpful news or damaging gossip. Never pass it on until you are sure it is helpful news.

A good test of most gossip: Would I be happy to tell this story if the person who is the subject of the story was listening also?

Have you ever had people gossip about you?

Did you like it?

Did it have a big impact on you?

If you have passed on stories that are really gossip, what can you do to fix the problem?

9.2 Contradictory use of the tongue

We all use our tongues both to praise and to criticise. With our tongues, we have all praised God and with our tongues we have all criticised or cursed other people. James says this sort of inconsistency should not happen.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.
James 3:10

So if we are to use our tongues more consistently, what do we have to develop and what do we have to avoid?

The first end of the spectrum James refers to is praising God. This we know, from many other passages in the Bible, is a good thing (eg. Isaiah 42:10 and Revelation 19:5). So it must be the other end of the spectrum that should be modified; the cursing of people.

In the law of Moses, there were very serious punishments for cursing particular people. Cursing parents (Exodus 21:17) and leaders of the people (Exodus 22:28) were forbidden.

In Matthew chapters 5-7, in a section known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to many laws given by God to the people of Israel through Moses. Jesus takes each of the laws and extends them so that not only would the laws be fulfilled in the letter, but in the intent as well. For example, in discussing murder, the law specified judgement for anyone who actually murdered someone. Jesus extended this command to include being angry with people. Furthermore, Jesus said that in most cases using abusive language about someone would put you in danger of punishment (Matthew 5:22).

Instead of anger, Christians are to practice love and instead of speaking abuse, we must practice using our tongues to build others up. For example, Paul said to the believers in a town called Thessalonica:

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

The idea is that we are to only say things that will encourage people or help them to become more godly. Jesus says that anybody who does what he commands is like a wise man who built his house on a rock which could survive the dangers of a flood. What we say to people must be aimed at helping them to build like that wise man. And it must encourage, not condemn.



To sum it up, as the fruit shows what a tree is like, so what we say shows the sort of person we are.

The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools

Proverbs 15:7

9.3 Teaching and the tongue

One of the uses of the tongue is to teach others. For Christians this is a very important use, because Jesus left a command that his followers should preach the gospel to everyone (Matthew 28:19-20). In the first century AD, Christianity spread through believers telling their friends about the good news they had heard. Families heard of the Christian hope and gladly told it to other family members. People with a newly sparked interest in the message were brought along to a home or other meeting place where believers met and talked about what Christianity really meant and how it could change a person's life. And so the message spread. The apostles were the first believers to be sent to spend their lives preaching and teaching, and they taught what they had learned from Jesus. Others followed and many thousands of people were converted to Christianity. James tells us that we should not all be teachers, and he seems to connect this with the problem of controlling the tongue.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3:1

This verse refers to people who teach in the church. James includes himself as a teacher and this letter is part of his teaching. Jesus was often called 'Teacher' by people and even called himself "the Teacher" (Matthew 26:18). However, he also insisted that the disciples should not be called "Rabbi" – a Jewish term that meant 'great one' or 'teacher'. Christians have only one with the title of "Teacher" or "Master" and that is Jesus.

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. Matthew 23:8-10

All Christians are expected to do some teaching, but some are expected to do more formal teaching in the Church. In 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 we read that God has appointed some for doing the job of teaching while others have different jobs. Some are expected to do various different jobs. For example, Paul said that he had been appointed a preacher, apostle and teacher (2 Timothy 1:11). He was appointed by Jesus to preach the gospel to unbelievers and to teach believers. Just think how much damage a preacher or teacher can do if they are not controlling their tongues – it can be a very large amount of damage.

Paul even warned Timothy that a time was coming when people would choose teachers who would teach what they wanted to hear rather than the genuine truth from God (2 Timothy 4:1-4). This would cause people to wander off into myths – what a misuse of the tongue.

In the worst case, teaching can change the gospel and Paul speaks about this in his letter to the believers in Galatia.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:6-9

For teachers, then, what they preach can make them accursed before God. A very serious result of the use of the tongue.

9.4 During the next week

During the week, think about gossip – not to practice it but to avoid it! When news comes your way, try asking the questions in Section 9.1.1.

Do you always use your tongue to help build others up? Try to answer the question by noticing what you say this week.

Remember to notice areas where you already use your tongue in a way which will please God and continue to do them. It is no good improving in one area of your speech while going backwards in other aspects where you already use your tongue in a Godly way!

9.4.1 Thought provokers

1. When people tell you stories about others, do you ever ask them for proof? Should you?
2. If someone begins to tell you stories about someone which you find hard to believe, what should you do?
3. Sometimes we may hear some bad news about another person (eg. they may be dying of cancer). If others know they can also pray for the sufferer, but how do we check such information is correct without gossiping?
4. Should we ever use our tongues to curse people?
5. One of the reasons cursing men after blessing God is so bad is that men are made in the likeness of God. What other areas are there where we should not do things to people because they are made in the likeness of God? Are there things that we are happy to do to men that we would not be happy to do to God? If so, should we change them?
6. Would we think about people differently if we saw them as being made in image of God?
7. Should all Christians teach others about the Bible?
8. What is the difference between the teaching all Christians must do and being a teacher such as James is talking about?

10. TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.
James 3:17-18

In this session we contrast two different kinds of wisdom: the wisdom from above and the wisdom of the earth.

The Bible often contrasts heavenly, God-like, good things with earthly, natural, evil things. God was the creator of the earth, but did not create it as an extension or direct copy of heaven. Instead, he made humans with a free will and gave them the opportunity to choose their direction in life.

The New Testament uses symbolic language more consistently than the Old Testament, and the terms "from above" (or "heavenly") and "earthly" (or "of the world") are used to show the division between good and bad. Some examples:

Set your minds on things **above**, not on **earthly** things. Colossians 3:2

Put to death therefore what is **earthly** in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming
Colossians 3:5-6

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.
John 17:14-16

The picture the Bible gives to us is of good coming from above to overcome the evil that is natural in the world. And throughout our life we have to make choices between the natural things of the world and the spiritual things from heaven. If we think in a natural way, there is no reason why we should avoid sexual immorality, impurity, passion, desire or covetousness. There is no reason to avoid killing our enemies, no reason to keep our promises – the only thing to avoid is getting caught! This is the wisdom of this world and it goes directly against the wisdom from above.

In this session, we will see where the two different types of wisdom lead: earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom.



10.1 Earthly wisdom

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.
James 3:14-15

James gives us a list of some of the things that come from earthly wisdom and none of them are pretty to people who know about God's ways. But don't expect people taught by this world to agree! The people considered to be wise by the world are 'self-made men', 'real go-getters'. The rich and powerful, those who succeed at business or sport or those who win a Nobel prize. Paul wrote 2,000 years ago:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,
1 Corinthians 1:22-23

If Paul were writing the letter today, he might write:

"Europeans demand scientific proof, Americans want a Hollywood blockbuster movie and Australians look for a sports star, but we preach Christ crucified...."

So how does one achieve success in the eyes of this world? James is quite right when he speaks of bitter envy, selfish ambition and boasting in his descriptions of worldly wisdom. Listen to political

leaders – chosen by the people to lead nations – and their bitter envy, selfish ambition and boasting come out very quickly. They regale us through the media with endless details of their successes, the failures of their competitors and their desire to add more personal achievements. And the rest of the people follow in this path. When an applicant applies for a job, they are expected to sing their own praises to the prospective employer and to describe their selfish ambitions in detail.

The other aspect that James associates with worldly wisdom is denying the truth. This can take many forms, but in its most simple form, it is lying about any facts that are not palatable. Any inconvenient or unpleasant details are simply denied, obscured or re-interpreted. However, we can also look at this in a religious way, since James was writing to Christians. Denying the truth will include denying the truth of the gospel. Jesus said that God requires people to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), but this passage suggests that if we do not approach God's truth using God's wisdom, we will deny the truth. If we choose to use worldly wisdom, we will reject God's truth – often as part of bitter envy and selfish ambition. This is a stern warning for each of us as believers about how we should approach our faith.

What does this application of worldly wisdom achieve? For Christians, it is easy to look around at the world and see all the suffering that comes from such attitudes: never-ending war, economic crises, slavery, poverty, ignorance and fear.

Earthly wisdom is not based on a wholesome spiritual attitude; instead it is the enemy of everything good and everything godly.

So let's look at two case studies and then at the better type of wisdom.

10.2 Case Studies

10.2.1 Ahab and Jezebel

Ahab was a king of Israel and Jezebel was a Sidonian princess whom he married and made his queen. They were both evil and chose to worship Baal rather than the God of Israel. Ahab was described as worse than all the kings of Israel before him. However, while Jezebel was completely evil from start to end, Ahab was made worse by following Jezebel's lead (1 Kings 16:30–33). One example was when he wanted to buy the vineyard of his neighbour Naboth to make a garden out of, and Naboth wouldn't sell it (1 Kings 21). Ahab went home and sulked and wouldn't eat any food – but though he was king, he didn't even think of using his power to do anything to Naboth. Instead, he told Jezebel and she arranged for Naboth to be falsely accused of blasphemy and killed, and then told Ahab he could have the vineyard. Elijah condemned Ahab for this action, and Ahab humbled himself and went about mourning, which God saw and approved of. A summary of the two is:

There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife.
1 Kings 21:25

Jezebel was evil herself, and she led other people into doing evil. If Ahab had had a good wife to lead him, he might have been a much better person. He didn't have the wisdom from above because he had sold himself completely to following earthly wisdom. His repentance after the killing of Naboth showed that he still had enough of the good in him to see when he had been wrong and to humble himself. We need to make sure that we keep to the way of heavenly wisdom ourselves – don't be led away from it by the worldly wisdom of the people we associate with. Sometimes earthly wisdom seems to make life easier, or to get us what we want but in the end it will kill us. Ahab got Naboth's vineyard for a while, but in the end he and his entire family died violent deaths – so much for earthly wisdom.

10.2.2 Solomon

Solomon was the son of King David of Israel. Shortly after his father died, God appeared to Solomon in a dream (1 Kings 3:5-15) and told him to ask for what he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom and God was pleased and promised him not only wisdom, but wealth and honour as well.

Soon after, two prostitutes who lived in the same house came to the king. 1 Kings 3:16-28 tells us that they had each given birth to a son, just 3 days apart. One woman said that the other woman had accidentally killed her own son by lying on him during the night. She also claimed that while she slept,

her own living child had been taken from her arms by the other woman, who had replaced it with the dead child. The women argued, with each saying that the living child belonged to them. How could Solomon decide who was telling the truth?

The king used his wisdom to trick the woman who was lying. He asked for a sword so that he could divide the child in two. As Solomon expected, the true mother of the child was even willing to allow the other woman to keep her child in preference to having it killed and divided up. The woman who had already lost her child was satisfied with the king's proposal – a sure sign that she was not the baby's mother!

Solomon announced who the real mother was and allowed her to take away her child – alive.

Was this the heavenly wisdom God had promised, or just a very clever trick from a very clever man?

Later in his life, Solomon stopped listening to the Godly wisdom he had, and started to listen to human or earthly wisdom. He made marriage alliances with all the nations around him and married many princesses. It would be easy to use human wisdom and praise this diplomatic behaviour as very wise – but God had already said that kings were not to marry many foreign women because they would be led to follow their gods and to abandon the true God (Deuteronomy 17:17). This is just what happened to Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-8). Human wisdom was wrong: Godly wisdom was right. Solomon also collected vast amounts of gold and silver and traded horses with Egypt, two other activities God had forbidden kings to undertake (Deuteronomy 17:16-17).

God, in his wisdom, had commanded kings of Israel to write out his law personally, by hand, and read from it all the days of their life. Solomon probably ignored this command also, since it is given in the very same place as the other commandments he had ignored.

When he [the king] takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Deuteronomy 17:18-20

Already, God was giving the instructions about Godly wisdom that James repeats. James forbids selfish ambition; the passage in Deuteronomy said the king must "not consider himself better than his brothers". These both seem to be describing the same problem. Even wise people like Solomon can go away from Godly wisdom if they choose to ignore the prompting of a wise conscience. After a while, a conscience loses its edge!

10.3 Heavenly wisdom

Heavenly wisdom does not need to stay in heaven. James says this wisdom comes from above, but that it is available for us here on earth from our heavenly father. Earlier in his letter (see also Section 2.1 of these notes), James had also made the point:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. James 1:5

Creation shows us a God who is wise beyond our imagination, but the Bible tells us that he is willing to share that wisdom with us if we ask. Solomon became the wisest king ever by asking God for wisdom. While he walked with God, his wisdom enabled him to rule the kingdom of Israel in justice and righteousness.

If we are wise and understanding it must show in what we do. Particularly, James says, it must show in the humility that comes from wisdom. This makes one simple test of wisdom in a person: are they humble? If someone is not humble, they are not wise with heavenly wisdom. Moses was one of Israel's greatest leaders, yet it is said of him that he was the most humble man alive (Numbers 12:3). Do we ever hear of international leaders being spoken of as humble men? Jesus encourages people who are weary and carry a heavy load to come to him – why? – because he is gentle and humble (Matthew 11:28-30). He is son of God and saviour of the world, but still humble because he is filled with heavenly wisdom. We never read in the Bible of God being humble, but it is part of the heavenly wisdom he requires of humans.

James goes on to describe the characteristics of the wisdom that comes from above. It is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. These are characteristics that appeal to all who want to be like God because they so much reflect the character of God as it can be shown in life by humans.

One of the things God wants us to do is to produce fruit (James 3:17). Paul tells us about the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 and growing fruit like this must be our ambition. This is not a selfish ambition, rather it is a reaching up toward God working to achieve this ambition throughout our life.

In an earlier session, peacemaking was mentioned as a good way to use our tongue. Here James mentions the harvest of peace that comes from people who are peacemakers (James 3:18). Imagine sowing seeds and reaping a bountiful harvest – this is likened to the peace that grows from the work of peacemakers. Jesus had earlier pronounced a blessing on people who channel their efforts into making peace:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Matthew 5:9

Jesus is the only begotten son of God, but we can also be sons of God by concentrating on peace.

10.4 During the next week

During the week, think about choices. We have many choices to make all the time. Some are more important than others, but all show the kind of wisdom that is in us.

Some ways to check on this:

- When we eat a meal, do we choose to thank God for it?
- When someone annoys us, do we tell them off or try to maintain peace?
- When someone tells a tasteless or dirty joke, do we join in the laughter?
- If someone disagrees with us, do we listen to their reasons or just assume they are wrong?
- We all like mercy for ourselves – do we show it to others?
- "By their fruit you shall know them" – do our fruits show us to be good or bad?
- Do we ever show partiality?
- When someone asks us for something and we give it to them, can we sincerely say "You're welcome!"?

10.4.1 Thought provokers

1. Should a servant of God ever be envious of anyone? Try to find Bible passages on the subject.
2. Is ambition always bad? Is selfish ambition always bad?
3. Must a Christian always be meek?
4. Do we ever use a requirement for meekness as an excuse for weakness?
5. What we do shows where our wisdom comes from (ie. whether it is from above or is earthly). Should we try to measure how wise others are and whether their wisdom is heavenly wisdom?

11. FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? James 4:4

Friends share interests and share activities together. Friends remain friends because of their shared desires and goals. Friends enjoy each other's company. It is because of this that parents have always been concerned about the friends that their children have. If you parents loved you, they will have made it clear that they also cared deeply about the friends you had. Some of us may have had our parents warn us about people we chose as friends. This shows two things that we can learn from:

- Parents are sure that the friends a child chooses can significantly affect the child
- Parents are sure that a child will not always be able to choose good friends



How often do we hear parents on the news explaining their child's bad behaviour by saying that they have turned bad since they fell in with a bad group of friends? So what does the Bible say about it?

The Bible says that parents are right in this! Friendships help to shape our character; they guide our interests, mould our morals and set bounds on our behaviour – and bad friends ruin good characters.

Some examples of advice about choosing friends from the Bible:

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared. Proverbs 22:24-25

Very simple advice – don't make friends with someone who does not control their temper.

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." 1 Corinthians 15:33

Very simple again – we mustn't fool ourselves, bad friends will make us bad. Paul here is probably quoting from a well-known author of the day (Menander) and agreeing with what he said. It seems that modern parents aren't the only ones who know that bad friends won't do us any good!

11.1 Choosing a friend

Since friends can have such an important effect on our life, we should be careful in our choice of friends. Another passage from Proverbs says:

A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. Proverbs 12:26

Choose friends carefully. Consider their character: is it admirable? Will your friend be a good influence on you or a bad influence? A good friend can challenge you and help your character to grow. We have probably all had experience of a friend at some time in our life who made us do better, live better and achieve more than we could by ourselves. This is the sort of friend we should be looking for and the sort of friend we should be to others.

There is an old English saying "A man is known by the company he keeps". When we consider this saying, we can see that there is much truth in it. When we see responsible teenagers, we expect that they will have friends who are also responsible. When we see a group of people causing trouble, we expect each of the individuals in the group to cause trouble – we just the individuals by the company they keep. But it is not always true. Jesus was condemned for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11:19), but he chose his friends with a view to helping them also. If he didn't help them nobody would. We have the same responsibility – to help others hear about the message of salvation and what God requires of them. But we must do it with care, remembering the warnings God has given us about choosing our friends. When we think we are strong enough to befriend bad people, confident that they will not be able to affect us for bad, that is the time when we need to be most careful – see 1 Corinthians 10:12 to read Paul's warning about this.

11.1.1 Difficulties

Some factors can make it more difficult to choose good friends successfully.

Imagine you meet someone who is very rich and very generous, they can become very attractive as a friend. You may become blind to their faults and make a bad choice of friend. Good looks, intelligence and popularity can also cloud our judgement so that we miss the warning signs of bad character.

On the other hand, if we have money, good looks, intelligence or popularity, it can become much more difficult to choose good friends – these characteristics can attract the attention of the wrong sorts of people.

During times of stress due to bereavement, ill health or other difficult situations, we can also be in danger of making or breaking friendships with too little care. During such times, friendships will probably have more impact on us than at other times, so even then, we must stick to our principles of making good friendships.

Righteous people must be cautious in friendships.

11.1.2 Case Study – Rehoboam, king of Judah

King Solomon built many impressive buildings and was very wealthy, but much of that was because he made his people work for him and pay heavy taxes. When he died, Rehoboam his son went to meet the people and to be crowned king. The people demanded less forced labour and lower taxes. If he satisfied this requirement, they would serve him. We can read the whole story in 1 Kings 12.

Rehoboam wasn't sure what he should do, so he asked the wise and experienced counsellors his father had used. The wise counsellors advised him to agree to the people's demands so that then they would make him their ruler and serve him. Rehoboam was not satisfied with their answer, so then he asked the young men who were his friends, the people who had grown up with him. His friends advised him to show off his power and tell the people that he was going to be a much stricter ruler than his father Solomon. Rehoboam listened to his friends rather than to the wise old men, and said that he would make their load much heavier. At this, most of the tribes of Israel rejected Rehoboam as king. He lost a kingdom because he listened to the advice of his friends to try and make himself feel important and powerful rather than listening to the wise advice of the older counsellors.

Rehoboam chose his friends and he didn't choose well.

11.2 Friendship with the world

11.2.1 Case Study – Judas Iscariot

Judas Iscariot was one of Jesus' disciples and followed him for about 3 years. He had the best possible that a man could have, but he chose friendship with the world over the friendship Jesus offered him. Money became his goal and money is never a good friend. Judas betrayed Jesus, who died and rose again after 3 days, but Judas lost everything and committed suicide with no hope of salvation.

Judas rejected his opportunity for friendship with Jesus and chose friendship with the world instead. As James said, in making this choice, he chose to be an enemy of God. What a tragic end to a life of opportunity!

11.2.2 Enmity toward God

Enmity is closely related to enemies. A feeling of enmity is a feeling of hatred. So why would people choose to be an enemy of God?

Before the flood, God said that every intention of the heart of all mankind was only evil – all the time. Mankind, with only 8 exceptions, chose a path that pitted them against God. God sent the flood and

the problem was solved for the time being. As people spread over the earth again after the flood, there were still many people who chose to love the world and all that it offers, rather than loving the God who made the world. We wonder why this would be, but at the same time we all know the temptation to follow our own desires and the wisdom of this world rather than the wisdom that comes from above.

In Galatians 5 Paul talks about the fruit of the spirit, but he also contrasts this list of good characteristics with a list of characteristics which he describes as the works of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19-21). The Bible uses many metaphors and this 'sinful nature' is also described in the Bible as 'the flesh' and doing these works is the same as loving the world.

On the other side, defeating this temptation is spoken of as overcoming. Jesus said that he had overcome the world (John 16:33) and in Revelation when he writes 7 letters to 7 congregations he speaks to each congregation about the rewards he will give to everyone who overcomes. John also says:

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.
1 John 4:3-5

People who try to overcome the world stand out. Their neighbours notice, their employers notice, their friends notice. For people who follow the desires of this world, choosing not to do such evil things seems very strange.

They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.
1 Peter 4:4-5

The choice is a stark one: please God now and you will live forever; love the world and you are choosing enmity with God and will have to give account for this on the day of judgement.

11.3 During the next week

During the week, review your friendships past and present.

- Think of people who were your friends and are no longer your friends. Should you try to renew the friendship?
- Think of your current friendships. Do these friends help you to grow in godliness? Do you help and encourage them in godliness?
- Are there other people with whom you could make friends – you may need them as a friend or they may need you as a friend.
- How important is it to you that you be a friend of Jesus? Does it guide your behaviour?
- Is friendship with God more important to you than any other friendship?

11.3.1 Thought provokers

1. Abraham is spoken of as a friend of God (Isaiah 41:8 and James 2:23). What made Abraham a friend of God?
2. Jesus said people were his friends if they do what he commands them (John 15:14). Since no one keeps Jesus' commands completely, does this mean none of us can be friends of Jesus?
3. Jesus called Judas 'friend' in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:50). Was Jesus saying that Judas was really his friend or is this just a familiar greeting?
4. How should friendship with God show in our life? Does it?

12. SUBMITTING TO GOD

... Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Submit James 4:6-7

12.1 Opposing the proud

The "7 deadly sins" are thought by many to be the worst sins that people can commit; and that list includes pride. In fact, pride is probably the root cause of most other sins. Being proud is thinking that we are more important than others. The problem of pride has been around since God first created Adam and Eve. It is probably the most basic of human failings and is the basis of most of the resistance to God in the world.

Being proud is considering ourselves as more important than anyone else and putting our needs or wants before anyone else's needs.

God is the creator. God has created and maintains the entire universe, estimated to contain more than 10 sextillion (10,000,000,000,000,000,000) stars. He manages this world too, with its 6 billion people: knowing the thoughts and aspirations of each. Not even a sparrow can fall to the ground without our God noticing it. Yet we still feel proud of ourselves and consider ourselves more important than others.

Some questions to ask yourself to see if you may have a problem with pride.

1. Do you think you are more likely to be right than other people?
2. Have you ever kept people waiting while trying to improve your appearance?
3. Is it important to you that people are aware of the good things you do?
4. Do you care if others think you are arrogant?
5. Do you praise people for the good they do? What about when they are doing things you know you should be doing yourself?
6. If you achieve something special or perform very well at work or school, do you have to tell others about it? What about if you have done something badly and been criticised for it?
7. Do you ever laugh at the way others do things because you can do them better?
8. Do you ever look down on others?

Because pride is such a basic failing of human beings, we find many verses warning about it throughout the Bible.

In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.
Psalms 10:4

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.
Proverbs 11:2 (ESV)

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18

One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour.
Proverbs 29:23 (ESV)

The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. Isaiah 2:11

These verses show some of the ways in which God works against proud people. The last of them reveals God's final plan for the pride of mankind: it will be humbled on "the day of the Lord" – a term often used to refer to the day of the return of Jesus to the earth.

12.2 Grace to the humble

Grace and mercy both speak of a kindness that is not deserved. One of the basic components of God's character is the showing of grace and mercy. In Exodus 34:6-7, God claims these characteristics, but also warns that he does not clear the guilty. In this verse in James 4, we are shown one way that we can make ourselves guilty and be held accountable to God for our sin. Pride makes us guilty in God's eyes. He gives grace to humble people, but not to proud people. If we want God to be gracious to us, he demands that we recognise his greatness and humble ourselves before him.



How can we learn humility? Jesus gave us an example of how to be humble. At the last supper, the night before he was to be crucified, he dressed himself in a towel and did what a servant would normally do – he washed his disciples' feet. We can read about this in John 13:3-17, and find Jesus' instruction to the disciples that they should wash one another's feet. Jesus was not only suggesting they should wash each other's feet – this was a living parable with the lesson being that they should serve each other in many ways. Jesus had always served them in many ways and now he was urging them to do the same for each other.

Jesus was telling them they should learn humility and learn to serve each other.

Jesus told parables about humility (for example Luke 14:7-11 about a person taking the most important seat at a feast and Luke 18:9-14 about a Pharisee whose prayer was full of his own importance). However, this was one of very few parables that Jesus acted out. It seems that its lesson was so important that he needed to make the point by showing it, not just by telling a story.

So if you want to learn humility and practice it, try learning the following verses and then practise what they teach:

1. Do something good or to help someone – and make sure no-one else ever finds out (Matthew 6:3-4).
2. Tell someone about something in your life you regret doing or a habit/characteristic are ashamed of but need help to improve with (James 5:16).
3. Compare your achievements in serving God with those of Jesus or Paul (Hebrews 3:1-2; Philippians 4:9).
4. Do not praise yourself or talk about the things you have done to serve God (Proverbs 27:2).
5. Do everything to give glory to God and not yourself (1 Corinthians 10:31).
6. If you feel like boasting, boast about God and his power (Jeremiah 9:23-24).
7. Praise others every day and consider them better than yourself (Philippians 2:3).

12.3 Submit to God

Resisting pride and working toward humility is what God wants us to do. This is submitting to God, because it is not what our human nature wants to do. Humans who are not led by God show pride and sneer at humility.

God's requirement of humility from us is a fascinating paradox – God says that if we submit to him and consider ourselves as not important, he will think we **are** important and will reward us. Only people who learn to submit to God in this way will be important in God's kingdom. James expresses it again:

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James 4:10

In choosing to submit to God, we are also choosing to resist the things inherent in our human nature. Paul says:

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:6-7 (ESV)

"Setting the mind on the flesh" is Bible shorthand for choosing to follow natural inclinations, and Paul emphasises that we cannot please God with this attitude. "Setting the mind on the Spirit" is what James is talking about when he says we should submit to God. It requires a conscious change in our attitudes and goals: resisting natural human desires and trying to replace them with thoughts and desires that bring us closer to God.

James expresses both of these ideas and also gives a promise of success when he says

...Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

James 4:7-8 (ESV)

There is a clear connection between the term "devil" used here and "the flesh" used by Paul. A simple picture emerges of the choice we must make between good and bad, between serving the flesh or serving God. The message of hope is that if we choose to get closer to God, then he will come ever closer to us. And he even tells us how to do it!

12.3.1 Drawing near to God

To draw near to God, we must concentrate on the mind of the Spirit, and we are told some of what this means:

- Cleanse your hands, you sinners (James 4:8 – see also Psalm 15).
- Purify your hearts, you double-minded (James 4:8 – see also James 1:5-8).
- Be wretched, mourn and weep (James 4:9 – see also Ecclesiastes 7:3-6).
- Turn your laughter into mourning and your joy to gloom (James 4:9 – see also Ecclesiastes 7:3-6).

More analogies are used here. Can you work out what they all mean?

12.4 During the next week

During the week try to practise developing your humility toward others using the exercises in Section 12.2. Do they help?

12.4.1 Thought provokers

1. Consider Romans 13:1-7, Ephesians 5:21, 22-24 and Hebrews 13:17. Should Christians submit to anyone other than God? If so, in what way? Are there any limits to that submission?
2. Does Jesus mean that we should literally wash each other's feet (John 13:14)?
3. Doing the best you can with your job is often called 'taking pride in your work'. Is this a good thing for us to do?
4. What does James mean when he says we should be wretched, mourn and weep in James 4:9? Aren't we meant to show joy as Christians (see Romans 14:17 and Philippians 4:)? Does Ecclesiastes 7:3-6 help with understanding this?
5. If God opposes the proud should we do so too?
6. If God shows mercy to humble people, should we do so too?

13. BOASTING ABOUT TOMORROW

13.1 Slander and fault-finding

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

James 4:11 (ESV)

Slander is saying wrong things about a person, with the intent of hurting the person. Sometimes it can also be aimed at making the person who says it seem more important. James says that we should not speak evil things against one another. Paul lists slander as one of things that we need to get rid of from our lives:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and **slander** be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (ESV)

A lot of slander comes from malice, from trying to hurt others. We can be angry with people, and store up our anger ready to return it by speaking evil about that person. Instead of this, Paul says that we should be kind and forgiving to one another, taking the example of forgiveness from God working in Christ.

People in authority make particularly good targets for slander. For example, the apostle Paul had evil things spoken about him. In 2 Corinthians 10:10–12 he wrote that people had described him as one who wrote powerful letters, but was really unimposing in person and did not do the things that he threatened. Part of Paul's response was to say that the people who were speaking evil about him were comparing themselves with themselves instead of looking at Jesus. In this they showed that they didn't understand who we should be trying to copy. Saying wrong and evil things about other people may make us feel better for a while, but it won't make us better people. If we think that we are better than those around us, then we have not been following the way of Jesus. James says:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

James 4:11-12 (ESV)

When we judge each other – whether rightly or wrongly – we are in fact judging the law and speaking evil against it. Earlier in his book, James reminded us that anyone who breaks any part of the law has broken all of it. The law was given to show us what we are like and to give us liberty. It gave instructions to help us to obey the word of God. The law was to be fulfilled by loving our neighbour, not by speaking evil of them or breaking them down. If we are using it to judge others, then we are judging the law and saying that it is not good enough because it should have focussed on other people, not on us. We are no longer doing the things in the law, because we have decided that other people's problems are more important than ours. However, James reminds us that we are neither the judge nor the lawgiver. That role is God's, and he has given all judgement to Jesus – not to us! We are to love our neighbours, not to judge them. When we do judge people, we always guess at their motivation and what they are thinking – why they are doing what they are doing. Sometimes we might deliberately say wrong things about them. At times we might accidentally guess their motives wrongly, and judge them based on that. This kind of slander hurts people, and can easily be passed from person to person without ever being stopped or corrected. We don't know enough about what people are doing to judge them. However, Jesus, our lawgiver and judge, does know why people do things. He won't judge by impressions from his eyes or his ears, but with righteousness. Our job is to obey God, not to be judges. Isaiah writes of Jesus:

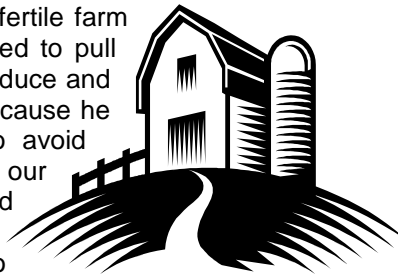
...and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Isaiah 11:3-4

13.2 Tomorrow

...you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." James 4:15 (ESV)

13.2.1 Case Study – The Rich Farmer

Jesus told a parable in Luke 12:16-20 about a man who had a very fertile farm which produced too many crops for him to store. The farmer decided to pull down the barns he had and build new ones, then fill them up with produce and take life easy. In the parable, the man's plans all came to nothing because he died. Jesus was telling the parable to people to teach them to avoid covetousness and greed, but the parable also teaches a lesson about our plans for the future. The farmer was sure that his plans would succeed and left God out of them completely. He had no need of God and confidently planned for a luxurious retirement, but his plans came to nothing when he died in the night – before he gathered in the crops.



Jesus has God calling this man a fool because he had left God out of his plans and assumed that he could do whatever he wanted himself.

James knew that Christians are human, just like unbelievers, and that human pride and arrogance can show in us too. He speaks of believers making plans to travel, trade and become rich while forgetting that God is in control.

Other examples of people who left God out of their plans and found they were wrong are shown in the following table.

Person	Passage	Comments
Agrippa – king of Judea, Samaria, Galilee and Peraea	Acts 12:2-19	Agrippa killed Jesus' disciple James (not the James who wrote this letter) and planned to kill Peter also, but the Lord sent an angel to release Peter from prison. Agrippa's plans failed, and so he blamed the guards and had them executed. God made the plans fail.
Jehoshaphat – king of Judah	2 Chronicles 20:35-37	Jehoshaphat was a righteous king, but he made an arrangement with the evil king Ahaziah of Israel to build trading ships to make lots of money. God was not pleased that Jehoshaphat chose to help Ahaziah, and the ships were wrecked. God made their plans fail.
Jezebel – queen of Israel	1 Kings 19:1-3	Jezebel sent a message to the prophet Elijah that he would be dead before sunset on the next day. God helped Elijah escape and Jezebel was never able to kill Elijah. God made her plans fail.
Goliath – Philistine champion	1 Samuel 17:41-49	Goliath was a giant of a man – about 3 metres tall. When he saw a young man called David approaching to fight him, he cursed him by his gods and promised that he would kill him and leave his dead body as food for the birds and animals. David killed Goliath. God made Goliath's confident plans fail completely.

It is easy to forget that we can die at any time if that is God's will. If we make plans for the future without acknowledging God's sovereignty we are boasting in arrogance.

Paul acknowledged the right of God to control events in his life. In Acts 16:6-10, Luke records a series of events which show this clearly. Paul had great plans for preaching. He planned to go to Asia – but was forbidden by the Holy Spirit from doing so. Then he attempted to go to Bithynia, but again was

not allowed to do so. He moved on again and was then given a message through a vision at night that he was to go to across the sea to Macedonia. He obeyed the command and many were converted because he was willing to accept that God knew best.

In 1 Corinthians Paul again shows that this was his habit. A couple of passages reveal his attitude.

But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, 1 Corinthians 4:19 (ESV)

I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. 1 Corinthians 16:7 (ESV)

13.3 Sin and knowing right

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.
James 4:17 (ESV)

What is sin? Often we think of sin as doing something that is wrong, but there are a few other scriptural definitions of sin as well, which show it to be more than this. Here are some examples:

1. Not doing something that you know to be right.

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.
James 4:17

2. Doing wrong.

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. 1 John 3:4

All wrongdoing is sin. 1 John 5:17

3. Anything not from faith.

...and everything that does not come from faith is sin. Romans 14:23

The three categories above show different types of sin – but they are all sins. Some people talk about sins of omission and sins of commission. Sins of omission are the sins where people have not done something they know they should have done. For example, Paul shows that a family has a responsibility to care for their widowed mother or grandmother:

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. 1 Timothy 5:4

Imagine if your mother was widowed and you decided that it was too much hard work to care for her. You know that she is your responsibility to provide for, but you decide to have nothing more to do with her. That is a sin of omission.

On the other hand, you know that you are not allowed to steal:

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands. Ephesians 4:28 (ESV)

Now imagine that you are walking through the supermarket and feeling a bit hungry. You slip a chocolate bar into your pocket, leave the shop and go outside for a tasty treat. You have done something wrong. This is a sin of commission.

Whatever way we sin, we can be sure that God sees us and knows what we have done (or not done). Sin leads to death (Romans 6:23), but God is willing to forgive our sins; we must repent of our sins and, with God's help, seek to do better next time.

So how can we find out what things are right for us to do? God has given us a manual for life – the Bible. If we want to find out how to live our lives in a godly manner, we need to read God's manual

every day in a way which will cover the whole Bible over a period of time. If we only read our favourite passages, we will not discover the complete message from God. Now imagine that you have a car that has broken down, and you read the manual and put it away without actually following the instructions given to fix the car. Will your car drive now? Of course not! In the same way we must put into practise the godly ways that we read about in the Bible. Without doing this we will be as 'broken down' as that car. By knowing what God expects of us in our lives, we can avoid sin.

13.4 During the next week

During the week, notice the way you speak to others. In particular take note of the times when you have something unpleasant to say about others. We hope this will not happen, but if it does, think about why you said those words, then answer these questions in your mind:

1. Was what you said true?
2. Were you angry with the other person?
3. Were you judging the other person's motives?
4. Were you trying to make yourself seem better by putting the other person down?
5. Would you like to have others speak to you in the way you spoke to them?

Now ask for forgiveness from the person (and God) for what has happened, and think about how to avoid having this happening again. Read Ephesians 4:31-32 again for some answers.

13.4.1 Thought provokers

1. Is it important to say "if the Lord wills", or is it enough to keep it in our thoughts and remember that God is in control?
2. Consider the different types of sin. Which type do you find the hardest to overcome? Why?
3. Read Romans 7:14-25 which speaks of our struggle with sin. Can you relate to how Paul feels?
4. Do you think some sins are worse than others are? Give examples and reasons.

14. WARNINGS TO THE RICH

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.
James 5:1 (ESV)

Practical Christianity is necessary for rich and poor alike. Rich people get no advantage in this through their richness – God does not take bribes! Poor people have no less expected of them than the rich, either. Rich and poor are both expected to give everything they have to God.

It is often quoted that "money is the root of all evil" but this is not what the Bible says – it does not include the entire message. The Bible warns that the *love* of money is the root of all evil. Throughout the Bible, God's message to us is that we cannot love anything more than God. We cannot serve two masters and our only master must be God. The warnings against gluttony, drunkenness, idol worship, covetousness and pride all seem to be based on the same requirement of our God, that we do not allow anything to take over our devotion to him. Food, alcohol, idols, money and our own importance can all take over our affections and must not do so. In this session, we consider riches and what they mean to Christians.

In the quotation above, it is easy to assume that this is referring to all rich people and that all rich people are evil. But this is not the case. Not all rich people are evil, and in fact, God has often rewarded righteous people with riches (eg. Isaac (Genesis 26:12-13), Solomon (1 Kings 3:10-13)).

However, it is common in the Bible for there to be criticism of rich people, and this session examines the difficulties of riches for Christians.

Rich people in the Bible

Person	Comments/references
Abraham	Genesis 13:2 A righteous man.
Isaac	Genesis 26:12-14 A righteous man.
Nabal	1 Samuel 25:2-3 An evil man described as a fool.
Solomon	1 Kings 10:23 Started righteous but was led astray by his wives.
David	1 Chronicles 29:26-28 A righteous man.
Jehoshaphat	2 Chronicles 17:5 A righteous man.
Hezekiah	2 Chronicles 32:27-29 A righteous man.
Xerxes	Esther 1:1-4 King of Persia.
Haman	Esther 5:11 An evil and proud man.
Kish	1 Samuel 9:1 Father of Saul, the first king of Israel.

Bad things about rich people

Criticism	Comments/references
Your rich people are full of violence.	Micah 6:12
People who want to be rich will fall into temptation.	1 Timothy 6:9
Commanded not to be haughty.	1 Timothy 6:17-19
A rich person is to rejoice in his humiliation since the rich will perish like a flower fades.	James 1:10-11
Are not the rich the ones who oppress you?	James 2:6
Rich have withheld wages of poor labourers who worked in their fields.	James 5:1, 4

you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.	From Jesus' letter to Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-18
He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.	Ecclesiastes 5:10
Whoever multiplies his wealth by interest and profit gathers it for him who is generous to the poor.	Proverbs 28:8
let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD.	Jeremiah 9:23-24

Jesus' interaction with rich people or comments on riches

Criticism	Comments/references
Rich giving donations compared with a poor woman	Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4
The deceitfulness of riches	Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14
It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.	Matthew 19:23-26; Mark 10:23-27
Jesus told a rich young man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor – he went away sad because he couldn't do it.	Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-27
God has fed the hungry but sends the rich away empty.	Part of Mary's prayer in Luke 1:53
Woe to you rich for you have received your consolation already.	Part of the sermon on the plain in Luke 6:24
Rich farmer – woe to people who are rich in money but not rich toward God.	Luke 12:16-21
You cannot serve both God and money.	Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13
If you have not been faithful with unrighteous wealth (money), who will give you the true riches?	Part of the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16:1-13
A rich man feasted sumptuously...	Part of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31
Zaccheus was a chief tax collection and rich. He said, "The half of my goods I give to the poor." Jesus said: "Today salvation has come to this house"	Luke 19:1-10
For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.	1 Timothy 6:10
In the last days people will be lovers of money.	2 Timothy 3:2

Gospel aimed first at poor people

Comments	References
The poor have good news preached to them	Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22
The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed [Jesus].	Jesus had been saying that people cannot serve both God and money in Luke 6:14
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.	Luke 4:18
Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.	Luke 6:20

An overseer must be not a lover of money.	1 Timothy 3:1,3
God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith.	James 2:5
Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics.	Jesus' instructions to his disciples to make themselves very poor when preaching – Matthew 10:9-10; Luke 9:3.
They asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.	Galatians 1:10
This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.	Ezekiel 16:49
Keep your life free of the love of money and be content with what you have.	Hebrews 13:5

14.1 Patience in suffering

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.

James 5:10-11 (ESV)

We are told to be patient when waiting for the coming of the Lord. An example given is a farmer who is waiting for precious fruit from the earth. He couldn't just plant seed and immediately expect fruit. He had to be patient and wait for rain to come. We also have to show patience when waiting for Jesus, and while we are waiting we should grow fruit, as James has talked about in earlier chapters.

While Jesus has been away for 2,000 years, we need to remember that he is standing at the door waiting to judge, waiting until the time is right. We need to avoid grumbling so that we will not be judged on it.

14.1.1 Case Study: The Prophets

The prophets set a great example of patiently doing what God told them to do when life was very hard. Hebrews 11:32–40 lists some of their triumphs, and also lists many of the things they suffered. These things are given in the table below – try and find examples of each of them. Importantly, given that James reminds us that we are waiting for the coming of the Lord, all of these prophets are also waiting for the coming of the Lord. They are examples of how to bear suffering with patience so that we can be ready for the kingdom of God.

Suffering	Examples
Tortured and refused to accept release	Micaiah (1 Kings 22:25)
Mocked	Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:7); various prophets (2 Chronicles 36:16); Jesus (Matthew 27:41); Apostles (Acts 2:13); Paul (Acts 17:32)
Flogged or beaten	Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:2); Apostles (Acts 5:40); Paul (2 Corinthians 11:25); Silas (Acts 16:19,23)
Put in prison or chained up	Micaiah (1 Kings 22:25), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 32:2), Peter (Acts 12:3-4), John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3), Silas (Acts 16:23), Paul (Acts 25:14)
Stoned	Naboth and his sons (1 Kings 21:1-14; 2 Kings 9:25-26); Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:21); Paul (Acts 14:19)
Sawn in two	Isaiah – according to Jewish tradition
Killed with the sword	Uriah the son of Shemaiah (Jeremiah 26:20-23); John the Baptist (Matthew 14:10-11); James the brother of John

	(Acts 12:2)
Wandered in sheep and goat-skins	Elijah wore a garment of hair (2 Kings 1:8) as did John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4)
Destitute, afflicted, mistreated	Joseph (Psalm 105:17-18); 100 prophets hidden by Obadiah in the time of Ahab king of Israel (1 Kings 18:4)
Wandered in deserts and mountains and caves	David (1 Samuel 22:1); 100 prophets hidden by Obadiah in the time of Ahab king of Israel (1 Kings 18:4); Elijah (1 Kings 19:2-4)

If we remain steadfast, then we will be blessed like these prophets are blessed. Here James is echoing the words of Jesus:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5:11–12 (ESV)

14.1.2 Case Study: Job

Job was a righteous man, and yet he lost his children, and all his possessions. However, this did not cause him to lose his faith. He did not blame God for his problems or sin because of his suffering. He even said:

The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.
Job 1:21 (ESV)

Job was patient, and was willing to accept the will of God. Later he was covered with painful sores and was left sitting in the ash-heap. He suffered with patience. In Job 2:9–10 his wife told him that he should curse God so that he could die, but his answer was that we should be willing to receive evil from God as well as good. He would not sin with his lips, because he knew the value of enduring in following God, and staying firm to the end.

Ultimately, we should be patient so that we can fulfil the purpose of God. God is compassionate and merciful and doesn't wish any of us to perish. Patience is one of the fruits of the spirit, and is built up by suffering. We do not suffer just to make God happy, but we suffer to teach us to submit ourselves to him. We need to show patience and recognise that God's plans are better than ours and his ways are different from ours. We have many examples in scripture for us to learn from, and the greatest is our Lord Jesus, who learned obedience from the things that he suffered (Hebrews 5:8). 1 Peter 2:19–25 reminds us of what Christ has done for us and how we should endure our suffering patiently like he did throughout his life:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.
1 Peter 2:21 (ESV)

The scriptures are clear that suffering is to make us more Godly, and that we should try to accept it with joy and patience. We need to continue to be patient in suffering until the end, but if we do we can have confidence in God's compassion and his mercy, and the crown of life will be given to us (James 1:12). We can hold fast in the knowledge that we have a permanent kingdom given to us by God, and that there is a reward prepared (Hebrews 10:32–39). All we have to do is be patient until the end, following the example of so many great men who have gone before us.

14.2 During the next week

During the week, you may find that thoughts pop into your head wishing that you had more money. It may be more money to buy more goods, to remove a worry about the future or many other things. It may even be a wish to have more money so that you can help others. What do you do when these thoughts enter your mind? Read Hebrews 13:5 where we are told to be content with what we have. Try it.

14.2.1 Thought provokers

1. Read Matthew 6:19-21, 24. In what way does mankind "serve money"? How is "storing up treasure on earth" different from prudence?
2. Do you ever feel that possessions are becoming too important to you? How can you prevent this?
3. Do you enter lotteries? If you do, why do you do so and do your reasons ever include a wish to be rich?
4. Imagine you find a lottery ticket. Should you keep it to find out whether it wins or not?
5. Do you deserve to suffer? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. Are you patient when you suffer?
7. Do you find your faith strengthened by suffering or does suffering make you doubt that there is a God?
8. Do you pray more frequently or less frequently when you are suffering and being tested? What does this reveal about your relationship with God?

15. PROMISES AND OATHS

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.
James 5:12 (ESV)

In this session, we consider what God wants his people to do in regard to the taking of oaths and telling the truth.

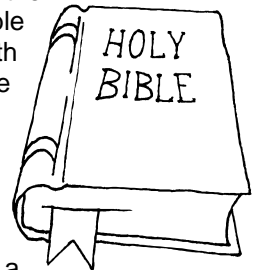
15.1 Taking oaths

There are a few commands in the Bible where things are singled out as being particularly important to keep. Of course, this doesn't mean they are the only truly important attitudes or activities God requires, but it does show us they are very important. From the rest of the Bible, we find these examples:

- For the people of Israel, to keep God's Sabbaths (Exodus 31:13)
- To put on love (Colossians 3:14)
- To keep loving one another earnestly (1 Peter 4:8)

James' insistence that we should not be taking oaths (James 5:12) is the only other passage to put in this list: the ban on taking oaths is important.

If someone has to be a witness in a court of law, there is a requirement for the witness to make some sort of commitment to telling the truth. Swearing by the Bible is the expected commitment, based on the idea that the Bible is full of God's truth that has not changed for thousands of years, and so swearing by it means that the evidence given is true and will not change.



Taking an oath is making a commitment to something with an appeal to something else as a symbol of how serious your commitment is. It is also described as making a vow – although vows did not always to include an oath. The link to the subject of telling the truth is that making a vow is just making a promise, but with an extra indicator to show how important this promise is to you. Sometimes in politics, the winning side will decide which of their campaign promises they intend to keep by calling them "core promises" or something similar. Other promises are considered disposable.

This last example strengthens the impression that an absolute commitment to truth is not considered a very important thing nowadays; in fact, it is frequently considered a bad thing. Very often, if we say that we are going to do a thing and something better comes up, we will just tell the original person that we are going to take the better option: the one we have a stronger commitment to. If we want to be really sure of something, then we will need to promise that we will do it, or to sign a contract. Even these things are frequently broken, as is revealed by the number of lawsuits for breach of contract.

15.1.1 Oaths in the Bible

In the Bible, we see some of these same things. People had to swear elaborate oaths so that others would be sure that they would keep their word.

Jesus ridiculed these careful distinctions between how important different oaths were when he was criticising the scribes and Pharisees a short time before he was crucified. He said:

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

Matthew 23:16-22 (ESV)

However, it does seem that once that they had made their promise and sworn their oath they were fairly careful to keep it, probably more careful than most people are now. James, however, is saying that it is not good enough to do what we say only if we swear by heaven that we will do it.

15.1.2 Oaths and us

Probably the first question that comes to mind when reading James is “Why shouldn't we swear by something? What's wrong with it?”

In order to find out why this was said, I think we should look in Matthew 5, where Jesus first said it.

I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. Matthew 5:34-37 (ESV)

This chapter is part of the famous Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus was instructing his followers how they should behave. A lot of what he said in this Sermon was of the form, “Here is what the law said, but I require you to do something that is much harder than what the law requires”, and this passage is the same. Matthew 5:33–37. What God expected in the law was that people who swore an oath or made a promise would do what they had sworn to do. However, this isn't what Jesus expects of a Christian. Instead, he expects that we should simply say either “Yes, we will do this”, or “No, we will not do this”. Anything more than this, Jesus says, comes from evil.

James is just repeating what Jesus had said.

15.1.3 Why change?

Why did things change from the Old Testament to the New Testament? Why do we have to behave differently from the Jews in the Old Testament?

It is obvious, from what people in the Bible said and did when they had made vows, that most people felt it was very important that they keep their vows – even when the vows led them into doing something that was against God's original orders. One example is how Israel treated the Gibeonites in Joshua 9. This is an interesting example because God had commanded the people of Israel to destroy all the different nations in the land of Israel. The Gibeonites had tricked the leaders of the people of Israel into swearing that they would not kill the Gibeonites. The leaders of Israel were tricked because they did not ask for God's advice. However, once they did make that oath, they were sure that they were not able to touch them for harm. This story is particularly interesting because the people of Israel decided not to do what God had told them to do, because they had sworn by God himself not to do it! They were right in this, too. Later on, in the time of Saul the king, Saul persecuted these Gibeonites and tried to destroy them. He may have been only trying to do what God had originally told the people of Israel to do – it says he did it in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. However, because of this, God said that Saul was guilty of their blood, and sent a famine on Israel for three years. After David asked God about this, seven of Saul's descendants had to be hanged before the guilt was satisfied. Even though this oath was against what God had originally told Israel to do, it was still important that the oath was kept by the people of Israel once they had made it and sworn it in his name.

God encourages the Israelites to take their oaths in his name (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20). But once they had done so, the oath must be paid.

When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 (ESV)

The same message is given in other places in the Old Testament. Oaths were special and must be kept.

Reviewing the keeping of oaths in the Old Testament, God makes two complaints against the Israelites and their attitudes:

- They did not keep their oaths (eg. Zechariah 5:4)
- They took oaths in the names of other gods (eg. Jeremiah 12:16)

By the time of Jesus, there had also been the change to swearing by items in the temple or on the altar. The things chosen as more important were the less important things in both the cases Jesus spoke about in Matthew 23. Just in case these things seem far away from today, here is the same passage again, but this time from a modern paraphrase called "The Message". The Message does not translate this passage, but its words carry enough of the spirit of Jesus' saying into the modern context to make it worth reading.

"You're hopeless! What arrogant stupidity! You say, 'If someone makes a promise with his fingers crossed, that's nothing; but if he swears with his hand on the Bible, that's serious.' What ignorance! Does the leather on the Bible carry more weight than the skin on your hands? And what about this piece of trivia: 'If you shake hands on a promise, that's nothing; but if you raise your hand that God is your witness, that's serious'? What ridiculous hairsplitting! What difference does it make whether you shake hands or raise hands? A promise is a promise. What difference does it make if you make your promise inside or outside a house of worship? A promise is a promise. God is present, watching and holding you to account regardless.
Matthew 23:16-20 (The Message)

So when Jesus told them not to swear at all, this was completely foreign to them. What Jesus said was harder to obey than what the law had commanded. It is a very easy to say, but it is much harder to do, because it affects so much more of your life. What the law said was that if you swore that you would do a thing, you had to do it. This meant that swearing could become a sort of a ceremony, and you knew exactly what you had promised to do and what you hadn't, and could plan to do it properly. It might have been a bit like signing a contract is now, performing all the right formalities, using the right wording, and even using a special pen for signing and a seal for sealing the contract. This makes sure our responsibility to keep our word limited only to special occasions and does not really affect most of our ordinary life.

On the contrary, Jesus' words required people to do what they said they would do: big or small. So, for us, keeping our word must affect all parts of our life. Anything we say we will do is a thing that we have to do. We do not need to swear by heaven, or by earth, or by the hairs of our head to make our word binding – things that we do not really have control of anyway. Instead, we need to treat our word as binding all the time.

15.1.4 Should Christians take oaths?

Jesus said: "Do not take an oath at all" (Matthew 5:34)

James repeats this: "...above all, my brothers, do not swear" (James 5:12)

Many have tried to explain that these simple statements are not really what was meant. Some have said that the commands were targeted specifically at avoiding taking of oaths in the name of pagan gods, but Jesus went on to refer only to things closely related to God. Possibly the easiest way to see if we should take oaths is to look at how Jesus behaved and how his followers behaved. Jesus told his followers not to take oaths or swear at all and he did not do so. There is no record of Jesus ever taking an oath, nor of his followers doing so.

Should we take oaths, then? If we are willing to take both the command and the practice of Jesus and his disciples, the simple answer is No. Rather, we are simply to take any of our commitments as binding.

15.2 Telling the truth

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Numbers 23:19 (ESV)

This shows us both how God is and how he sees us. Whatever God says that he will do, he does. The words that he speaks are fulfilled. However, as he reminds us, mankind does lie and does change his mind. In our natural state, humans cannot be trusted. Sometimes we choose to tell the truth, and sometimes we don't. Frequently, we change our mind about the things. In the words of Jesus, we might say "Yes" to doing something, then change our minds later and decide it's really not so worth doing. This is a picture of us in our natural state, as ordinary human beings. However, one of the things we must do as followers of God is to change our ways to be more like our God, and to overcome our natural human failings. One of the areas in which we must do this is in keeping our word, since in this we show that we are followers of him. In the Bible we read about the certainty of the words that God speaks, and that the Lord Jesus speaks. Of God we read in Isaiah:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever.
Isaiah 40:8

While Jesus said of himself in Luke:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
Luke 21:33 (ESV)

If we wish to be becoming like these two (and the desire to become like them is one of the requirements of being a Christian), it is obvious that we need to give attention to keeping our word as well.

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.
John 4:23-24 (ESV)

There are two descriptions of righteous men in the Psalms that include keeping promises. The first is in Psalm 15 and shows how deeply important truth should be to us:

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart
Psalm 15:1-2

The second is in Psalm 24, which speaks about keeping promises and oaths:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.
Psalm 24:3-4 (ESV)

Of course, for Christians, oaths are no longer taken, but the message is still appropriate – it just refers to any commitments we may make.

People also talk about "white lies", but these do not come from the Bible. Instead in the Bible, Paul tells us:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
Ephesians 4:15 (ESV)

Truth is essential, but it must also be paired with love. If things need to be said that are difficult, they must still be said, but they must be said carefully and thoughtfully. There is no option to tell "white lies", rather that the truth must be told with love.

15.3 During the next week

During the week, consider the importance of truth. Christianity is often described in the New Testament as "the truth" because it told about God, who is a God of truth and about his plan for salvation.

Why not try to find how often the expression "the truth" is used in referring to the gospel.

15.3.1 Thought provokers

1. Why does the Old Testament tell the Israelites to take oaths and the New Testament says not to?
2. Do you take oaths? Would you take an oath if asked to do so in a court of law?
3. Did people in the New Testament take oaths?
4. Does God ever tell lies? Did Jesus?
5. Is it ever right to tell a lie? Can you find any support for this idea from the Bible?

16. THE POWER OF PRAYER

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

James 5:16



Having spoken about many practical things in Christian life, James concludes his letter with an encouragement to pray. The word prayer in English has the original meaning of asking for something, but prayer is not only about asking for things. Prayer is speaking to God for any reason at all: praise, thanks, confession, requests or anything else. Despite the fact that we cannot see God and normally cannot hear him speaking to us, prayer can be a two-way communication.

16.1 Case Study: The Lord's prayer

Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray as John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray. They were godly people and thought prayer was important. Jesus taught them a prayer that has been known as "the Lord's Prayer" ever since:

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."
Matthew 6:9-13 (ESV)

Most people who grew up as Christians will have learnt this prayer at some time during their life, and once we learn something it can be easy to skip through what it says without thinking about it carefully. This prayer, however, contains so many lessons that several people have written entire books on the subject! Jesus wanted his disciples to know the sorts of things they should pray about. Some quick questions and points to note:



1. Who is the prayer directed to?
2. What does "hallowed" mean?
3. Obviously God's kingdom is important.
4. When will everything that happens on earth be what God wants?
5. Requests for food and goods are limited to our daily bread.
6. Our forgiveness depends on us forgiving (see also Matthew 6:14-15).
7. Does God ever lead us into temptation?
8. Should we recite the Lord's prayer or should we think up our own prayers?

16.2 Prayer in the Bible

There are several prayers written down in the Bible. Some of them are:

Character	Passage	Content
Moses	Psalm 90	God is everlasting and shows anger and love
Hannah	1 Samuel 1:10-13; 2:1-10	Asking for and then dedicating Samuel
Samuel	1 Samuel 15:11	Praying all night after Saul was rejected
David	2 Samuel 7:18-29	Praise and thanks (also Psalm 17, 86, etc.)
Solomon	1 Kings 8:22-53	Dedication of the temple
Hezekiah	2 Chronicles 30:18-20	Healing of people at Passover
Jonah	Jonah 4:2-3	Anger at forgiveness of Nineveh
Ezra	Ezra 9:5-15	Confession and repentance for foreign marriages
Nehemiah	Nehemiah 1:4-11	Confession, repentance and request for help
Daniel	Daniel 9:4-20	Confession, repentance and request for help

16.3 Prayer and the Christian

...pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Christians should pray. Prayer is our lifeline to God.

16.3.1 How often should we pray?

The Bible does not tell us how often we should pray. Paul's instruction to pray continually seems to be saying that we should never give up with praying, rather than suggesting that we should spend all of our time in prayer. Some examples from the Bible:

Character and frequency	Passage
Daniel prayed 3 times a day (on his knees)	Daniel 6:10
David praised God 7 times a day	Psalms 119:164
David prayed for help 3 times a day	Psalms 55:17
Jesus prayed all night before choosing his disciples	Luke 6:12
Cornelius prayed regularly	Acts 10:2

Each Christian must choose how often they wish to pray to God. He has given us prayer as a way of communicating with him. It is up to us how often we choose to contact him.

16.3.2 Special positions, special language

An old tradition says of James that he had knees with calluses like a camel's knees because he spent so much time on his knees in prayer. Over the centuries many different positions for prayer have been used and many people have suggested that there is only one possible position in which we should pray. So let's look at what the Bible says of prayer positions.

Character	Position	Reference
Joshua	Full length, face down before the ark	Joshua 7:6-7
Solomon	Standing with hands raised to heaven	1 Kings 8:22
Elijah	Head between his knees	1 Kings 18:42 with James 5:18
Hezekiah	Lying down with his face to the wall	2 Kings 20:2
Daniel	On his knees facing towards Jerusalem	Daniel 6:10
Ezra	On the ground outside the house of God	Ezra 10:1
Jesus	Looking up to heaven	Matthew 14:19
Jesus	Face down in Gethsemane	Matthew 26:39
Paul and the believers from Tyre	Kneeling on the beach	Acts 21:5

We must conclude that God does not require us to get into a particular position before he will hear our prayer. Rather, it is the attitude of the person praying that matters. Our God hears our prayers unless our attitude or actions separate us from him (Proverbs 28:9 and 1 Peter 4:7).

16.3.3 What should we pray about?

The following is said to be a prayer found on the body of a confederate soldier in the American civil war.

I asked for strength that I might achieve;

I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
 I asked for health that I might do greater things;
 I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
 I asked for riches that I might be happy;
 I was given poverty that I might be wise.
 I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
 I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
 I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
 I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
 I got nothing that I had asked for,
 but everything that I had hoped for.
 Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered;
 I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

This prayer highlights God's way of answering prayers. We often pray with a short-sighted attitude to make ourselves more comfortable or happy in the short term. God sees the future and has much wider plans than we do, and he answers our prayers accordingly.

16.3.4 "Do's" for prayer

Praise	Matthew 6:9; Hebrews 13:15
Give thanks	1 Thessalonians 5:18; Colossians 3:17; 1 Timothy 2:1; Matthew 14:19
Make requests for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wisdom ● The peace of Jerusalem ● Establishment of Jerusalem as a praise in the earth ● Health for ourself and others ● Kings and those in authority ● Mercy ● Forgiveness ● Help in trouble ● Others 	James 1:5 Psalms 122:6 Isaiah 62:6-7 James 5:14-15 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Psalms 143:1 Matthew 6:12 James 5:13 James 5:16; Ephesians 1:15-18

16.3.5 "Don'ts" for prayer

Don't	Reference
For a pretence make long prayers	Mark 12:40
Keep babbling	Matthew 6:7; Ecclesiastes 5:2
Ignore the law in his life	Proverbs 28:9
Be inconsiderate with wife	1 Peter 3:7

16.3.6 Healing

James speaks specifically about physical health and healing in relation to prayer: if we are sick, we should ask the elders to come and pray over us and anoint us with oil in the name of the Lord. The oil referred to would be olive oil, which was used by the good Samaritan in Jesus' parable for treating the man beaten up by robbers. In the Old Testament, olive oil was used for anointing kings, priests and prophets, as well as for everyday use as a cosmetic. James does not specify what the oil is included for, but he does make it very clear that it is the prayer of faith that will save the one who is sick.

He also mentions that sin can be connected with sickness (see also 1 Corinthians 11:28-30) and that the prayer of faith can cause sins to be forgiven.

16.4 "ACTS"

Many people use an acronym "ACTS" to help them keep their prayers balanced. Each letter of the word "ACTS" can be used as the starting letter for a word describing a concept that can should be included in our prayers.

Adoration – praise to God for his greatness, love, mercy, kindness and goodness.

Confession – admission of guilt or disobedience to God's law. Acknowledging sin.

Thanks – expressing appreciation for God's gifts to us.

Supplication – requests for help from God

16.5 Reclaiming lost believers

Peter denied he knew Jesus. David committed adultery and murder. All people, except Jesus, have failed at some time and many have wandered away from God for a time. People who stray from God are still important to him, so Christians have a responsibility to do their best to bring them back.

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.
James 5:19-20

James repeats what God had said before, that if people stray from him, they will die unless they turn back to him again. If you can turn someone back to God, you will save his life.

16.6 During the next week

During the week, work on prayer. Paul said that he wanted men everywhere to pray – lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling. Find where he said this (Hint: it is in a letter he wrote to Timothy). See what else you can learn from the chapter in regard to things you can pray about.

If you don't already do so, make an effort to arrange your life so that you can copy Daniel, who prayed to God three times per day. He prayed on his knees, so it was not just a quick snatch of prayer while he was busy doing other things.

16.6.1 Thought provokers

1. Why do we pray if God knows all our thoughts?
2. How often should we pray?
3. Are all prayers answered?
4. When God gives us what we ask for, do we remember to say thankyou? If not, is there anything we can do to improve our memory with these things?
5. How necessary is faith in relation to prayer?
6. How should we prepare our minds for prayer? Should we have a list of things or people to pray about?
7. Is it bad to fall asleep while praying to God?
8. James speaks about the use of oil in healing. Was the oil important? Should we still use oil today or should we use some modern equivalent of what the oil was for? Or do we not need anything like oil at all?