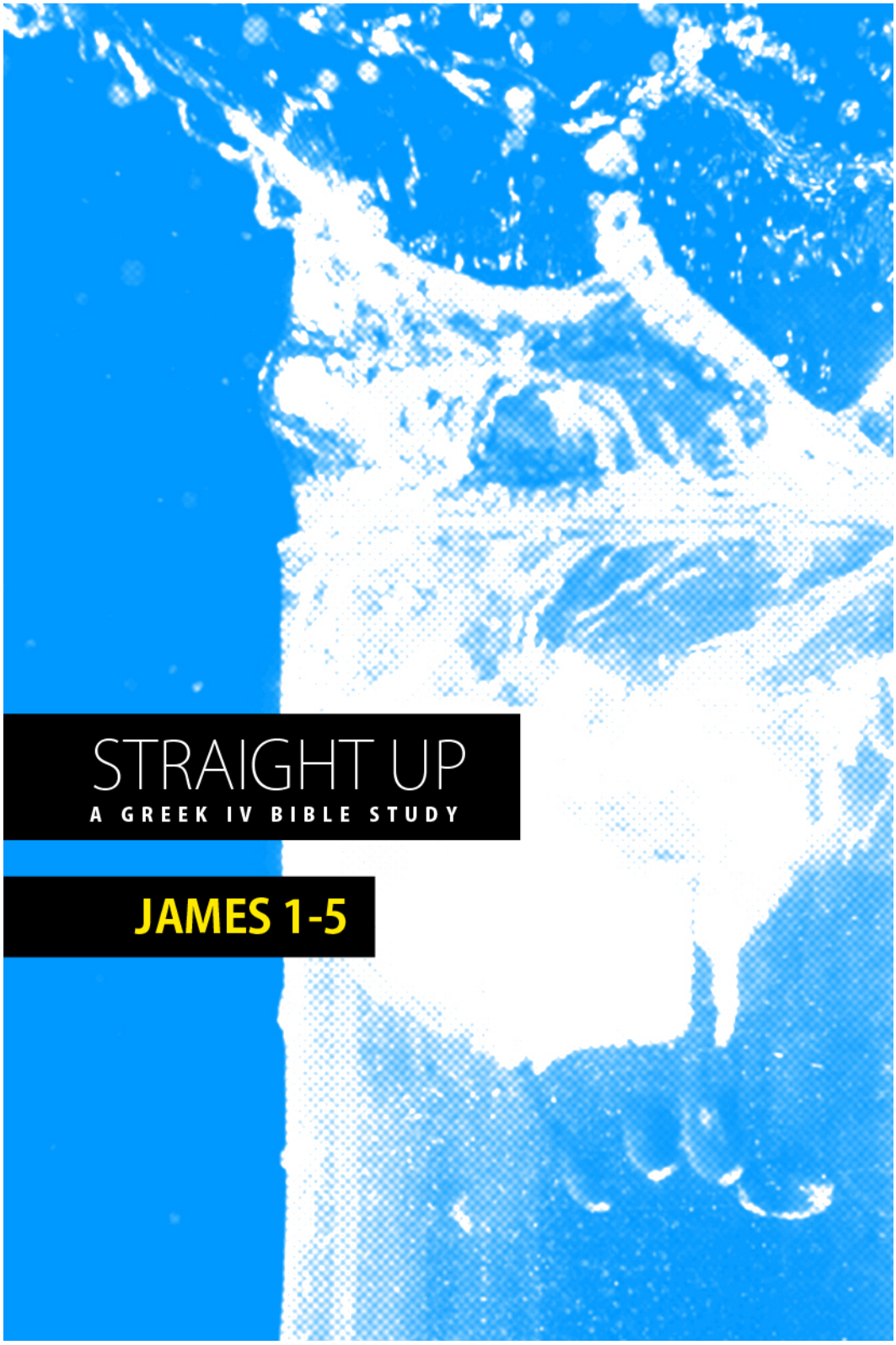

STRAIGHT UP

A GREEK IV BIBLE STUDY

JAMES 1-5

STRAIGHT UP - 2

STRAIGHT UP

A GREEK IV BIBILE STUDY

Note to Leader

These Bible studies have been written with three goals in mind:

1. In studying the Bible, Greek students will see that the ancient scriptures intersect with their lives today, discovering that God can speak directly to them through the Bible.
2. Interesting conversations will be generated. People would leave the study and say, "Wow that was a really great discussion!"
3. Deeper relationships will be forged. Greeks in the same chapter know each other well, but long to connect in deeper and more significant ways. By asking some probing questions Greeks would find ways to share more deeply.

As a leader, feel free to tweak this study to fit your group. This series on the book of James was written to have five studies total, but if you find them to be too long for your group, we designed them in such a way that each of the five studies can easily be broken up into two parts. Also feel free to skip questions. You know your brothers/sisters, and you'll have a good sense of which questions they will respond to and which ones will generate the best conversation and dialogue.

Feel free to print out the questions for your group members or just print out one copy for yourself and read them to the group members. You decide; it's up to you to adapt the study to the unique needs of your group.

STRAIGHT UP

A GREEK IV BIBILE STUDY FROM THE BOOK OF JAMES

Introduction to the book of James

The book of James is not a feel-good book. James messes with our lives. He has no tolerance for people who claim to be Christians yet show no evidence of a life that has been transformed by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. He meddles with our pride, our pocketbook, our gossip, and much more. James would agree with the apostle Paul that we are saved by faith alone, not by good works—but James pushes us to see that the faith that saves never shows up alone. True saving faith manifests itself in our lives; it becomes evident in how we do life 24/7.

James was the half brother of Jesus (his mother was Mary and his father Joseph. See Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:53–55). James spends very little time on doctrine. He rarely quotes the teaching of Jesus or the Old Testament, yet a careful reading of the text will show that the entire book of James is infused with Jesus' teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and great truths from the Old Testament.

In five short chapters, James puts us through a painful diagnostic that uncovers the junk of our lives and the areas in need of the transforming work of God. But, there's hope! James doesn't leave us in a devastated state; he shows us how to live out a robust Christian faith. A faith that is straight up.

Written by Mindy Meier Edited by Kristen Dalton

James 1

When Tough Stuff Hits: Tests, Trials, and Temptations

Ice Breaker

What has been the hardest test you have taken in college? What made it so difficult?

The book of James has a lot to say about how we relate to the people around us, but before James starts down that road, he wants to make sure we are tight with God--that our relationship with God is in the right place. He pushes us to take a look on the inside.

James explodes the myth that new birth in Christ will solve all our problems and that we will be exempt from trials, tribulations, and temptations. While God does not willfully subject us to cruel suffering, at the same time He can work through the hardships of life in a broken and fallen world to bring about a refining process. In reality one of God's methods of bringing his people to maturity is by allowing them to experience trials.

Read James 1:1–18

1. What trial are you experiencing in your life today? What are we to do when we face trials and why (vs. 2–4)? Is that realistic?

2. How would you view your current trial differently if you really believed it was God's instrument, developing your maturity in Christ?

3. James 1:5 says, “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.” This great verse has often been wrenched out of the paragraph and looked at in isolation as people seek God’s will in their life (e.g., “Should I go to grad school?” Should I break up with the person I am seeing?” “Should I get a part time job?” etc), but this instruction “to ask for wisdom” is in the context of seeing life’s trials as God’s method of building maturity. Why would someone in the midst of a purifying trial need to ask for wisdom?

4. Hard stuff in our life can either make us better or bitter. How do you account for the fact that the same difficult experience leaves one person bitter and jaded while another person is better than they were before?

5. How are we to ask God for wisdom (or with what ‘posture’) according to verses 6–8? What happens if we don’t ask God in such a way?

6. In vs. 9–11 the author turns our conventional understanding of wealth upside down. How might wealth and abundant material possessions have an adverse effect on a vital faith in God? What counter-cultural views does James teach about wealth? Has your faith changed your views about money and wealth in the past couple of years?

7. Look at verses 12–14. Verse 12 says, “Blessed is the person who perseveres under trial.” What does the word “blessed” mean in this context? Is persevering different from just passively enduring bad stuff in life?

8. Why are staying power, endurance, stickablity, and steadfastness needed when training for a marathon, hanging in a tough marriage, showing up for a difficult job, pushing through a difficult class, or sticking with your Greek chapter despite problems?

9. When have you felt like giving up? Where do you need God’s staying power in your life today?

10. According to verses 13–14, where does temptation come from?

11. What kind of desire is James talking about in vs. 15? What's the end result when we give evil desires full reign? Is it wrong to have strong desires? Are all strong desires that we possess built into us by God?

12. According to verses 16–18, what do we receive from God? How does this help us overcome our vision of God as a heavenly scrooge? How can we avoid the temptation to fill our legitimate, God-given longings with illegitimate things?

13. What temptations are you facing that need the help of your brothers or sisters in the chapter?

Read James 1: 19–27

14. Read the list of instructions in verses 19–21. Which command is hardest for you to obey? How could being quick to listen and slow to speak help you manage your anger?

15. Who has been a great listener for you in your life?

16. How does the term "Sunday Christian" illustrate James' point in verses 22–24? What would James say to Christians who merely attend a one hour service each week to "get their card punched?"

17. In verses 26–27 we find three litmus tests for authentic faith. What is the negative evidence mentioned in verse 26? What two positive evidences are mentioned in verse 27?

18. How are the words we speak an accurate index of what we are at the core of our being? When have you gotten yourself in trouble by not having a tight reign on your tongue?

19. Why is looking after orphans and widows such a radical demonstration of transforming faith? (see Deuteronomy 14:29 and Jeremiah 22:16 for commands regarding the poor, the orphans and widows) Who are the powerless in society today? What might you do in response to their needs?

20. How could someone follow the command "Keep oneself from being polluted by the world" when living in a fraternity or sorority? What could you do as a band of brothers or group of sisters to help each other in this pursuit?

Closing Reflection

Our highest goals in life are often happiness, peace within, and prosperity. But God has different goals for us. He wants to live His life in and through us. God wants to form Christ in us and His method is often using trials and hardships. God wants us to be "Exhibit A", a prime example of His radical love to a watching world. May we be straight up; that is, people who do not just listen to the word, but actually live out an authentic faith.

James 2

Who's Hot?
Who's not...

Icebreaker

During recruitment, what scores big points for your Greek Chapter? What does it take to be a _____? (Fill in your Greek affiliation: Sigma Chi, Tri-Delt, Kappa, ATO etc.) What does your Greek chapter look for, value, and esteem in potential new members?

Read James 2:1–13

Then read this updated Greek version…

Hey guys—don't show favoritism. Suppose a cool guy shows up wearing an Armani shirt, designer jeans, Gucci shoes and hip sunglasses. Then a nerdy guy also shows up, only he's wearing shabby clothes. If you show special attention to the cool guy and say, 'Hey, dude, want to hang with us? Take shotgun' but say to the nerd, 'Take a hike!' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become a judge with evil thoughts?"

1. What sin is James confronting in the first four verses of James 2? Why is this an affront to God?

2. How can a Greek Christian NOT show favoritism and still participate in recruitment of new members?

3. James describes the rich and the poor that were attending their Christian meetings. What does James say about the poor (vs. 5)? What does James says about the rich (vs. 6–7)? Is this description true of the rich and poor that you know?

4. How might this biblical text reshape the way you treat others?

5. What is “the royal law” (vs. 8)? Why is it called the royal law? It sounds so good—why is it so hard to put into practice?

6. How would your Greek chapter be different if the members really practiced the royal law?

7. Favoritism seems like such a small sin compared to murder and adultery which are seemingly HUGE sins. How can a murderer, an adulterer, and a person who shows favoritism all have the same label of “lawbreakers?” (verses 9-11)

8. Verse 10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” Why is this true? How is the Law of God like a sheet of glass that is considered broken if it even has one crack?

9. How might labeling everyone a “lawbreaker” curb favoritism?

Read James 2: 14–26

10. James now gives us four examples of faith—two negative and two positive. The first negative example is the armchair advice-giver found in verses 14–17. How does a person’s faith become exposed as dead or authentic by its reaction to human need?

11. Do you think that people who profess faith but have no deeds do damage to the reputation of Christians?

12. The second negative example is found in verses 18–19. If the demons believe there is one God, why are they not saved? What are we to learn from the negative example of the demons?

13. In verses 21–24, Abraham is given as a positive example of faith in action. How did Abraham’s actions demonstrate huge faith (See Genesis 22 for background)?

14. In verses 25–26, we see the second positive example: Rahab, a prostitute (see Joshua 2 for background). How could a prostitute ever be considered "righteous?" When the Old Testament is filled with hundreds of dignified faith heroes, why would James select a female, Gentile prostitute as our great role model of faith in action? What hope does this give us?

15. How do the selections of Abraham and Rahab demonstrate the lack of favoritism spoken of earlier in James 2?
    Male/female; Jew/Gentile; highly regarded hero of the faith/prostitute

16. Is there a situation in your life where God is asking you to be like Abraham or Rahab and put your faith on the line?

17. To what human need is God's Spirit asking you to respond?

Closing Reflection

The world around us—and the Greek system in particular—pushes us to evaluate people based on our sense of cool. But God's economy is straight up; ALL people are of unspeakable worth to Him. May we as Christians not be known just for the creeds we profess and the doctrines we hold, but by the radical way we love people—all kinds of people.

James 3
The Power of Words

Ice Breaker

Did you ever play with matches as a kid? Did you ever get burned while playing with a cigarette lighter, a firework, a sparkler or a candle? Share a story from your childhood where you first learned the power of fire.

In a world of frequent emails, constant texting, incessant status updates, instantaneous blog posts, and 140 character "tweets", it is easy to loose sight of the impact of our words. James touched on the dangers of an unbridled tongue in chapter 1, verse 26—but now he lets rip with a full-on confrontation about the stuff that comes out of our mouths. He knows that our words are a window into our soul.

Read James 3:1–12

1. What does James have to say about teachers in verse 1? Why is James so hard on teachers (vs. 2)?

2. Is it possible to be in a position of influence (teacher, coach, priest, CEO, professor, pastor, school principal, or senator) and NOT come under greater scrutiny? Does criticism just go with the territory when you are in a position of influence?

3. Words are powerful. Share an incident from your life where the words of a coach, parent, teacher or pastor have been life-altering; either in damaging ways, or in life-giving ways. Whose words have left marks on your soul, for better or worse?

4. James employs three illustrations to teach us about the power of the tongue in verses 3–5. What are they?

5. The bit of a horse is extremely small, yet controls and directs a HUGE animal. What can we learn from this illustration (vs.3)?

6. The horse's bit controls strong passions that arise from within. How can control of the tongue lead to managing these powerful drives within?

7. What is the point made by the illustration of the ship and the rudder (vs. 4–5)?

8. The ship's rudder deals with forces from outside; strong winds and waves. How does control of the tongue help us to weather the storms that come into our lives from the outside?

9. What can we learn from the third illustration—the spark that causes a forest fire (vs.5–6)? Can you think of an incident in the national news where a brief, off-the-cuff remark turned into a big deal, replayed over and over on TV news programs?

10. What do verses 7–8 say about our tongues? Do you find this to be true in your life? What situations in your life set you up to let the volcano within erupt into damaging words?

11. James calls out our inconsistencies in verses 9–12. How do you account for this duality that we find within? How can we be so kind and loving one moment, and then do a 180 and be a real jerk the next?

12. What do you find helpful to do when evil thoughts bubble up within you and you know you are on the verge of lashing out?

13. Is James giving us a gag order? If all this is true about our tongue, why even try to control it (vs. 7–8)?

14. Has the presence of Christ in your life changed the way you speak? All the examples in this passage show that our words are a powerful force that needs to be managed. How can positive words be evidence of a transformed heart?

James has caused us to take a look inside. He tested the authenticity of our faith by seeing our response to human need and has confronted our sometimes destructive words. Now he turns our attention to interpersonal relationships. Authentic faith should also affect how we get along with those around us.

Read James 3: 13–18

15. What are the 2 kinds of wisdom James mentions in verse 15? Describe the source, symptoms, and results of each.

16. What exactly is "selfish ambition"? (vs. 14, 16)? If a person pursues excellence, is that selfish ambition?

17. What effect does envy and selfish ambition have on a group of people? How does envy and selfish ambition play out in your Greek chapter?

18. What do you envy in other people ….grades, perfect body, car, healthy family, girlfriend/boyfriend, leadership position in house, money, clothes, popularity, social skills, musical ability, athletic prowess, electronics, intelligence, MCAT score? Feel free to name more than one!

19. What is the source of quarrels (vs. 16)? What is the source of peace (vs. 17)?

20. Is it possible to know the motives of another human being?

21. List the virtues in James 3:17. Can you be a REAL MAN and have these traits? Can you be an EMPOWERED WOMAN and have these traits? Will people just walk all over you?

22. Becoming a Christian does not eradicate our sinful motivations; we still struggle with envy and selfish ambition. How does becoming

self-aware—unmasking the junk inside and being honest about it—set us on the path to battling this out with God's help?

23. What has been helpful to you as you deal with envy? What has been helpful in dealing with selfish ambition? How would being open about these struggles diffuse the toxic effect they have on people?

Closing Reflection

Becoming a Christian is a radical thing. Through God's transforming power we are changed from within. God is at work in us to change the way we speak to others, to make us peacemakers, to fill us with mercy for those who fail. Surely these traits are a mark of the supernatural evidence of a straight up "God thing", right?

James 4
Relational Meltdown

Ice Breaker
When you were in high school, who did you argue and quarrel with the most…mom, dad, step-parent, brother, sister, school friends, team mates, co-workers, coach, teachers? What was the conflict usually about?

As mentioned before, the book of James is not a feel good book. James messes with our lives. But this fourth chapter of James is his most severe confrontation. He gets in our face about our tendency to quarrel, gossip and brag. Once again James puts us through a painful diagnostic that uncovers the junk of our lives that needs the transforming work of God.

Read James 4:1–6

1. Fights and quarrels appear on the surface of our lives. They are symptoms. What is the source? What is going on below the surface of our lives that causes these interpersonal conflicts (verses 1 & 2)?

2. In verses one and two, military terms like "battle", "war", and "kill" are used to describe our willingness to go after anyone who stands in the way of our personal gratification. Why such strong metaphors?

3. What can we learn about prayer from verse 2b and verse 3? What makes you reluctant to get real with God and ask God for what you truly want? How does the problem of self-centeredness seep into our prayers?

4. Throughout scripture, the marriage metaphor is used to speak of the intimate and personal love relationship God desires to have with us. Continuing on with the marriage metaphor, what makes people guilty of adultery…what makes them "adulterous people" (verse 4)?

5. The term "the world" in verse four does not refer to physical planet earth or its inhabitants, but the whole world value system that is diametrically opposed to God's kingdom rule. What is the meaning of the term "friendship with the world"? It sounds like a good thing, but why is it so bad? What might this look like on a daily basis?

6. We often think of jealousy as a negative thing, maybe even a sin, yet God is said to be a jealous God (Exodus 20:5, Joshua 24:19–20). Jealousy is God's appropriate and righteous unwillingness to allow anything other than him to be at the center of our heart's affections. (See verse 5) What things or people are you tempted to allow to replace God as your first love?

7. How is God's jealousy the flip side [or the other side of the coin] of his deep love for us?

8. How is the truth in verse six—"but he gives us more grace"—the remedy for our sometimes wandering heart?

Read James 4:7–12

9. What ten commands are given in rapid fire sequence in verse 7–10?

10. Verse 9 tells us to look at the sin in our life and change our laughter into mourning and our joy into gloom. This is a huge contrast with the fraternity/sorority culture that celebrates sin, boasts about bad behavior, and finds bonding moments in joint

drunken escapades. How could a Christian live out this verse and not be a social buzzkill or negative person?

11. Looking at verses 11 and 12, why is it wrong to slander another person and speak against your brother or sister? Is gossip a problem in your chapter?

12. In your opinion, why do people criticize others?
    a. to build themselves up
    b. because they are jealous
    c. because they feel superior
    d. because they are annoyed and need to vent
    e. other

13. Who is the one in verse twelve that is the true lawgiver and judge? If we really believed that criticizing another person was "playing God", how could this help us curb our tendency to gossip?

14. What should you do when a group of brothers/sisters starts to gossip? How could you avoid the sin of gossip and yet not become judgmental toward the gossips?!?!

Read James 4:13–17

15. Compare and contrast the two different types of people mentioned in verses 13–15. How are they similar and how are they different?

16. James likens our life to a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Can you think of the sudden death of a friend, family member, or even a celebrity that really brought this truth home to you?

17. We like to think we are in control of our lives, that we are "the master of our fate and the captain of our soul", but why is this an illusion?

18. Does this section teach that long-range planning is wrong? Why or why not? How does the uncertainty of life impact our ideas of time management?

19. Verse 16 talks about boasting and bragging. What are you most likely to boast about?
    a) Your grade point
    b) Your athletic achievements
    c) Your resume and accomplishments
    d) Your Greek chapter
    e) Your well-toned body
    f) Your family's wealth and status
    g) The person you are dating
    h) Your office in the chapter
    i) Your possessions (clothes, electronics, etc)
    j) Other

What are you LEAST likely to boast about?

Closing Reflection

Today's study has been a straight up "in your face" confrontation. James pushes us to have an authentic faith that is not just confined to the religious edges of our lives, but shows up in how we interact with people at parties, in class, at the dinner table, and hanging out in late night bull sessions. As we place Christ at the center of our heart's affections, may that result in genuine humility. May we hold life loosely, knowing that truly our future is in God's hands.

James 5
Not Alone

Ice Breaker
Our precious things can so easily be ruined: your car is totaled, a bike left in rain begins to rust, a cigarette burn scars a leather couch, bleach is spilled on your favorite sweater, your iPod falls and cracks, water damage ruins a photo album, coffee spills on your laptop. Can you share a story where something you valued was ruined?

In this last chapter of James, the author begins with his characteristic straight up confrontation. This time he hits head-on the topic of wealth and its potential abuse. But as this final chapter unfolds, James shifts from calling us out to showing us how. He moves beyond confrontation to positive teaching about how this holy life God calls us to can be lived out—by broken and imperfect people, living in a broken and imperfect world.

Read James 5:1–6

1. James warns of the misery that awaits "you rich people". What crimes have they committed, what sins are they guilty of?

2. How can wealth have an adverse impact on a person's spiritual wellbeing?

3. How can a Christian enjoy life, yet not be guilty of self-indulgence? What guiding principles can help you know if something is so extravagant it is over the top?

4. Verse 4 talks about unpaid laborers. Would these scenarios below be modern day equivalents? Why or why not?
    a. A powerful CEO who is paid millions of dollars and yet does not provide health care for his/her employees.
    b. A father who does not pay child support and yet drives a flashy car.
    c. A roommate who does not pay his/her share of the rent and utilities yet spends hundreds of dollars on new clothes and pricy electronics.
    d. A college student who signs on for an expensive spring break trip yet owes his brother or sister money.

5. Who hears the cries of the (unpaid) harvesters? (4b). How would this truth be of comfort to the powerless that are being ripped off?

6. In verses 5 and 6, the wicked rich are likened to cattle that continue to fatten themselves right up to the time they are slaughtered. At what point are the wicked rich similar to animals on the brink of being butchered?

7. No one thinks of themselves as rich. The rich are those people that have more money than you do; it's all relative. But if you are in college, you are rich by the world's standards or will be when you graduate. What safeguards can you take to not let wealth have a negative effect on you?

Read James 5:7–12

1. What are the three examples James uses to speak of patience? What can we learn from each of them?

2. Christians are encouraged to be patient and stand firm because the coming of the Lord is near. God will come back and set all things right. How would this knowledge help those suffering at the hand of the rich oppressors?

3. James warns of the “misery that is coming upon you” (5:1) and says “The Judge is standing at the door” (5:9) but then concludes in 5:11 that “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy”. Is he contradicting himself?

4. 11. Look at verse 12. According to this verse, is it wrong to say, “I swear to God I did not borrow your…..” What is wrong with using God’s name or heaven or earth to validate the truth of what you say? What does it mean to let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no?

Read James 5:13–19

1. Who are the 4 people at prayer in verses 13-18?

2. The follower of Christ is called to pray in times of trouble, as well as times of happiness. Which situation is more likely to prompt you to pray?

3. Should people who are sick call for the elders to anoint them with oil and pray for their healing instead of going to the doctor…in addition to the doctor….or when regular medicine does not seem to be working? Does modern medicine work with or against God’s ability to heal?

4. Can you share a time when it was evident God healed you or someone you know?

5. What is the connection between sickness and sin? (5:14, 15). Does sickness in a person always indicate there is sin? (for additional insight see John 9:1-41)

6. Verse 16 says, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that your may be healed.” What good thing would come about if people actually did this? How would this vitalize a faith community? What makes it so hard to take off our mask and get real with other Christians about our sins?

7. What point does Elijah illustrate?

8. Verses 13–16 speak of people who are keenly aware of their need for spiritual help; they are seeking prayer, but what about the person that does not seem to want help? What can you learn from verses 19 and 20 about how to deal with a person who does not seek help but seems to need it?

9. We often think that confession should happen with a priest or pastor, and that wayward Christians should be pursued by a professional (someone in full time Christian ministry), but James seems to give these responsibilities to ordinary believers. Why would this be beneficial? What could be a potential problem with this?

10. Have you ever wandered away from the faith? What has helped you, or would help you, get back on track? What has been, or would be, damaging for you?

11. How should you handle it if you see a brother or sister of yours in the chapter who claims to be a Christian making damaging choices?

Closing Reflection

The book of James ends on a note of hope. James has messed with us, he has called us out, and he has uncovered the junk of our lives that needs the transforming power of God. He has called us to a robust Christianity that is humanly impossible to live out. We can only be who God calls us to be when we discover the power of prayer and the power of the faith community working in tandem. Only when we connect with God through prayer, and release his power into our lives, will we see personal transformation. Only when we get real with each other, and allow those around us to help us on our faith journey, will we see true transformation and live out a faith that is straight up. Perhaps then the faith community will be attractive to a skeptical, watching world.

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