

Bible Study on the book of James

NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible

Week One: Read James Chapter 1:1-27

1:1 Though James could have identified himself by his influential role in the Jerusalem church ([Gal 2:9](#)) or his kinship with Jesus ([Mt 13:55](#)), he instead calls himself a “servant”—a title that speaks of both his submission to God the Father and the Lord Jesus as well as his divinely delegated teaching role in the tradition of Moses ([Dt 34:5](#)). James is probably writing to early Jewish Christians who were scattered outside Jerusalem by persecution ([Ac 8:1](#); [11:19](#)). He employs Old Testament language (“the twelve tribes”) as a way of encouraging the letter’s recipients that they belong to the true people of God. The letter’s formal introduction (“Greetings”) is found elsewhere within the New Testament only in two letters that are included within the narrative of Acts, one of which is also from James ([Ac 15:23](#); [23:26](#)).

1:2–4 Regardless of the number and variety of trials faced by the letter’s recipients, James *commands* these early Christians to reckon such trials as pure joy. Why? Because a sovereign God is working through these difficulties to produce in believers the character quality of endurance or perseverance. This transformation is all part of God’s master plan to increasingly conform his people into the image of his Son ([Ro 8:29](#))—a work that will not be fully complete until we stand glorified in his presence ([Ro 8:30](#)). No Christian faces any difficulty apart from the loving superintendence of the heavenly Father.

1:5–8 In this broken world, believers face many difficulties and sorrows. How is it possible to remember the Lord’s good and sovereign purposes when facing such trials? The gift of divine wisdom is needed, and James reminds us that God is not a giver who scolds or gives halfheartedly or changes his mind. God generously, with unwavering intent, gives wisdom to those who ask. God does not demean or reproach us because we are needy and frail. In approaching God in prayer, however, one thing is necessary: faith. James contrasts the constancy of God the giver with the erratic doubter. Here James employs one of his many memorable images: the tossing of an unpredictable and erratic sea billow as a picture of the one who doubts God. James is not commanding the believer to work up some sort of extraordinary belief that God will answer a prayer in some specific way. The faith that is required is to believe that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is all-good, all-loving, and all-powerful, and he wants to give us wisdom to view our trials from his perspective. If we have lingering fears and doubts, God is pleased with our honest confession and cry for help, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” ([Mk 9:24](#)).

1:9–11 A common trial in this life—and one for which we need divine wisdom to receive under God’s sanctifying sovereignty—is economic privation. Though the world often views a poor person with disdain, God welcomes the poorest Christian believer as an adopted son or daughter, seated “in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” ([Eph 2:6](#)). Wealth can be an even

greater trial, as Jesus frequently warned ([Mt 19:23–24](#)). The wealthy believer must embrace their role as a humble slave of Christ. The rich person should remember that riches are fleeting and not find their comfort or hope in them ([Jas 1:10–11](#); [1Ti 6:17–19](#)). Christianity turns worldly values on their head—exalting the humble and humbling the exalted.

1:12–15 The truly “good life,” and the one approved by God, is not the pain-free life but is instead a life of Christian faithfulness and perseverance through trials. God has given his people great promises as a means of encouraging us through the dark valleys of this broken world. One such promise is the crown of life (or “life as your victor’s crown,” [Rev 2:10](#))—that is, Christians can look forward to God crowning us with eternal life in his presence. When facing temptation to sin, a Christian should remember that God is sinless and never tempts someone to sin. Although demonic or worldly influences may tempt us, the culpability for succumbing to temptation rests with us. Christians must fight against a sin nature—indwelling sinful impulses that must be resisted by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians should remain strong in the face of temptation because they could easily fall into the sticky mire of sin. A life lived in unrepentant sin is the highway to death and hell. Thankfully, God’s Holy Spirit convicts Christians of sin and enables their repentance and restoration. It is much better, however, to resist initial temptation and avoid the devastating effects of sin in our lives and the lives of those around us.

1:16–18 Temptation does not come from God, but good gifts certainly do! The first such divine gift is salvation. God is constant, reliable, and unwavering in his gracious saving work, something that James picturesquely contrasts with the waxing and waning of the moon or the movement of the sun and stars through the sky (i.e., the “shifting shadows” of the “heavenly lights”). James writes, “[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (v. [18](#)). We see three truths here. First, one’s salvation is ultimately the work and choice of God. Second, salvation comes about through a spiritual rebirth. The apostles insist that a true follower of Jesus must be “born again” ([Jn 3:7](#)). Third, the “word of truth,” or the gospel, is the instrument that the Holy Spirit uses to bring about spiritual life. Those who experience this new birth are described as “firstfruits” of all God created. They are the visible token of God’s renewing work, which anticipates his transformation of the entire cosmos ([Ro 8:22–23](#); [Rev 21:3–5](#)).

1:19–27 Transitioning in his typical staccato style, James offers timeless wisdom on sinful anger and hasty speech (vv. [19–20](#)). He then broadens out the exhortation, calling on believers to “get rid of all moral filth” and cultivate the implanted Word of God (v. [21](#)). For the genuine Christian, the Word of God has a lasting and growing presence in their life. Verse [22](#) provides a succinct summary of many themes in the letter: “Do not merely listen to the word [of God], and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Superficial, nominal, non-transforming faith is not saving faith. Just as a mirror reveals what our faces look like, so the Word of God reveals who we really are and calls us to repentance, faith, and obedience. “The perfect law that gives freedom” (v. [25](#)) is the Old Testament Scriptures as fulfilled and interpreted by Jesus (cf. [Mt](#)

[5:17](#)). True freedom is found in obedience to Jesus, something that is only possible for the Spirit-empowered, born-again believer. True religion, warns James, is not a matter of thinking oneself to be religious. True religion, in God's eyes, is keeping away from wickedness (e.g., evil speech, various moral pollutions in the world) and aligning oneself in word and deed with the priorities of God (e.g., caring for those in society who face the direst material circumstances).

- a. [James 1:2](#) The Greek word for *brothers and sisters* (*adelphoi*) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family; also in verses 16 and 19; and in 2:1, 5, 14; 3:10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19.

Week Two: Read James Chapter 2:1-26

[2:1-7](#) James repeatedly addresses the recipients of his letter as "brothers and sisters." This address does more than signal a transition to a new paragraph. It reminds the recipients of James's affection for them as well as his shared filial status, something that obligates him to the same obedience and love that he commands. James begins this new section by informing these early Christians that there is only one worthy of special treatment: the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. People show sinful partiality based on many characteristics (personal appearance, race, biological kinship, etc.), but here James focuses on one of the most common types of favoritism: giving special treatment to the wealthy, which is really lightly veiled self-exaltation. James imagines a situation in which a Christian fawns over a wealthy visitor to the church meeting (also translated "synagogue") while at the same time directing a poor visitor to a lowly seat on the floor. Even modern Christians must be wary of showing partiality toward the wealthy through either formal actions (e.g., favoring the rich for leadership positions in the church) or informal behavior (e.g., inviting for lunch only more well-heeled visitors). By favoring the wealthy, James warns, people implicitly set themselves up as wicked judges, practicing sinful discrimination. Although the world looks down on the poor, God has a special concern and care for them. A poor person's continual state of need can lead them, under the Holy Spirit's empowerment, to look to God for their daily provision in a way that truly honors their Creator. The person is poor in the eyes of the world but is rich in faith. How wrong, then, for God's people to disparage those with whom God is pleased! James also notes how foolish it is to fawn over the very people who are exploiting us (v. [6](#)). In the context of James's addressees, rich landowners were perhaps loaning money to small farmers and then using the courts to pounce on their land in a year of bad crops. It's not clear if these rich non-Christians were verbally blaspheming God or only implicitly doing so through evil behavior and rejection of the gospel. It's not difficult to think of modern parallels. Some religious leaders court the cultural and political elite, reveling in their "connections" or "influence" while ignoring the blasphemies of those to whom they show public partiality. And, in the end, what real benefit do these religious leaders gain by their flattery?

2:8–13 James continues his arguments against favoritism toward the rich. Obeying the Scripture to “love your neighbor as yourself” ([Lev 19:18](#)) demands that one love both rich and poor alike. James cites this command as coming from “the royal law”—implying that impartial love of neighbor should be the pattern of life in the kingdom of God, as inaugurated and taught by Jesus himself ([Mk 12:30–31](#)). A person showing partiality toward the rich may be inclined to dismiss their behavior as a minor offense alongside God’s other “more important” laws. Such self-defense is just as ridiculous as someone claiming, “Hey, all I did was murder someone. I didn’t commit adultery or anything!” By using the example of murder, James may also be implying that to mistreat and exploit a poor person over time could lead to their actual death (e.g., through starvation). There is a day of judgment coming, and the way we treat others, especially showing mercy to the poor, reveals whether we ourselves have truly experienced the mercy of God (cf. [Mt 18:32–35](#)).

2:14–19 Verse [14](#) opens what is probably the best-known portion of James’s letter (vv. [14–26](#)), both because it pointedly summarizes James’s main theme (obedience or spiritual consistency) and because it has been a source of controversy since the time of Martin Luther (1483–1546), who suggested that it was impossible to reconcile the writings of Paul and James. The writings of Paul and James are in fact complementary. Paul attacks legalism, which wrongly teaches that a person can earn their acceptance before God by good works. Paul says that a person is justified (i.e., set in right relationship with God) solely on the basis of faith in Jesus ([Gal 2:16](#)). James, on the other hand, attacks nominalism. A person’s claim to be in right relationship with God is tested by their way of life. A person is *shown* to be righteous by their deeds. Just as empty words are no comfort to the physically needy Christian brother or sister, so an empty profession of faith is dead and useless ([Jas 2:14–17](#)). Faith and deeds are not separate “gifts” so that a Christian may have one but not the other (v. [18](#)). Genuine Christian faith inevitably produces deeds and gives evidence of saving faith. Simply professing monotheism without having a life that shows submission to God demonstrates a demonic faith (v. [19](#)). In fact, the demons’ faith may be “superior” in that they have some visible response—shuddering at their coming judgment! The apostle Paul likewise affirms that genuine Christian faith must result in a changed lifestyle (e.g., [Gal 5:6,19–21](#)).

2:20–26 James continues his argument that faith without works is dead. He does not say there are two kinds of genuine faith—one with works and one without. There is only living faith (which has works) or dead faith (which doesn’t). James appeals to two Old Testament figures—one Jewish male, one Gentile female—as Scriptural proofs and practical examples that genuine faith shows itself in deeds. Abraham didn’t just say he believed God; he obeyed God by offering his son Isaac on the altar (v. [21](#); [Gen 15:6](#); [22:1–18](#)). Similarly, Rahab the prostitute didn’t just privately believe in the God of Israel in her heart; she risked her life to support the Israelite spies who followed this only true God ([Jas 2:25](#); [Jos 2:1–15](#); [Heb 11:31](#)).

Week Three: Read James Chapter 3:1-18

3:1–6 One of the primary ways we demonstrate who we truly are is by our speech, “for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” ([Mt 12:34](#)). In this broken world, sinful impulses remain in the Christian and, if allowed to run unchecked through the tongue, such sinful talk can cause immense personal and communal damage. Through various poignant metaphors and impassioned appeals, James calls for Christians to let all their speech be consistent with their Christian profession. James begins this section by focusing on persons who speak publicly the most (i.e., teachers) and warns against hastiness in taking up the mantle of teacher since it is so easy to err in speech (morally or doctrinally) and thus incur God’s strict judgment. James then broadens out his instruction on speech to all believers. Just as a tiny metal bit turns a large horse or a small rudder steers a ship, so one’s tongue, though small, has huge effects. One tiny spark starts a huge forest fire. So also the tongue, when broadcasting unchecked sinful inclinations, ignites a destructive conflagration in one’s life and relationships. The tongue is “a world of evil” ([Jas 3:6](#)) in that all the various forms of wickedness in this fallen world (e.g., lust, hate, jealousy, etc.) find audible expression through the tongue. “Hell” (Greek *gehenna*) is a place of eternal suffering where the devil, demons, and rebellious humans will be thrown in judgment ([Mt 25:41](#); [Rev 20:10](#)). To speak of speech as “set on fire by hell” ([Jas 3:6](#)) implies that sinful words are worthy of God’s eternal judgment. If Christians were judged on the basis of their speech alone, they would be eternally condemned. Thank God for the perfect life and perfect speech of Jesus, which makes us acceptable before God. And thank God for Jesus’ death, which atoned for our sinful deeds and words.

3:7–12 Though the world is filled with various domesticated animals, there are no examples of completely tamed tongues. Even Christians, regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit, must acknowledge how easy it is to stumble in speech (v. [2](#)) and how much harm their tongues can cause (v. [8](#)). James hones in on one particularly troubling sin of speech: slander—the hypocritical inconsistency of praising God while at the same time cursing a human being made in God’s image. James invokes various pictures from nature (water springs, grapevines, figs, olive trees) for his appeal that Christians live consistently with their new status as God’s reborn people ([1:18](#)).

3:13–18 Just as some people are naively overeager to be known as teachers in the church (v. [1](#)), so others want to be known as wise (v. [13](#)). That’s fine, says James, as long as one seeks genuine wisdom. Genuine wisdom is not esoteric knowledge that exalts someone above others; it is a posture that accepts the true God as king and judge and then lives in light of that reality ([Pr 1:7](#)). True wisdom, like true faith, shows itself through deeds done in humility ([Jas 3:13](#)). There is a worldly and demonic “wisdom” that is characterized by pride, envy, and selfish ambition. Such “wisdom” spills out of one’s life through disorderly and vile behavior (v. [16](#)). True wisdom, on the other hand, produces visible fruits that reflect the holiness, mercy, love, kindness, impartiality, and peace of God. Wise people will strive for godly harmony with others

and, as a result, will see a harvest of righteous behavior in their own lives and in the lives of those around them (cf. [Mt 5:9](#)).

Week Four: Read James Chapter 4:1-17

4:1–3 When James asks, “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” one can only imagine the finger-pointing and accusations if his recipients had been allowed to respond. It’s not other people or unjust situations that are causing a quarrel; it’s evil desires in our own hearts. We must look first within ourselves for the cause of the strife around us. A covetous heart inevitably demonstrates itself through quarreling and fighting (v. [2](#)). What does James mean, though, by accusing the community of killing because of unfulfilled desires (v. [2](#))? Actual murder does not fit the context. Perhaps James is drawing on the language of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where hateful speech and actions are associated with murder ([Mt 5:21–22](#); cf. [1Jn 3:15](#)).

4:4–10 James denounces some of his recipients as “adulterous people.” In the Old Testament, Israel was the metaphorical wife of the God of Israel, and when she was unfaithful, she was called an “adulteress” ([Isa 54:5](#); [Jer 2:2](#); [Eze 16:32](#); cf. [Rev 21:9](#)). In choosing this language, James continues to affirm his addressees (or some among them) as the people of God—but a people needing firm correction for having violated their most sacrosanct and intimate relationship. In accusing these early believers of “friendship with the world” ([Jas 4:4](#)), James means that some among the congregation are adopting sinful values and locking hands with the world in its active rebellion against God. God demands loyalty from his people ([Dt 6:24](#); [Jos 24:15](#); [Heb 12:29](#)). Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other” ([Mt 6:24](#)). God’s holy jealousy for our unwavering loyalty is a righteous but overwhelming demand that can only be met by the gracious God who will answer the prayer, “Grant what you command” (Augustine, *Confessions*). In whatever way we have dabbled in the world’s wicked values or behavior, we should humbly admit our sins and come to our gracious Father, the only one who can rescue us from both our own deceitful hearts and our devilish foe. The intensity of the repentance described in [James 4:8–10](#) challenges our superficial and perfunctory repentance. Have we truly seen the implications of our disobedience, and if we have, why have we not humbled ourselves in sorrow before God?

4:11–12 James points out one particular way some Christians have adopted the world’s wicked values: they are judging and speaking slanderously about others. He may be reflecting on [Leviticus 19:16a](#) (“Do not go about spreading slander among your people”), as many themes in his letter correspond with the instructions of [Leviticus 19](#). The law of God instructs us to love our neighbors ([Lev 19:18](#)), not to stand in judgment of them or malign them. Thus, when we judge our neighbors or speak evil of them, we are the ones breaking God’s law. God

alone is both giver of the law and judge of human hearts ([Jas 4:12](#)). How foolish and disrespectful of us to arrogate that status to ourselves!

4:13–17 James rebukes human presumption in planning. Humans so easily forget that each day of life (and any abilities or gifts associated with life) are from God and may be withdrawn by the Creator at any moment. James says bluntly, “You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (v. [14](#); cf. [Mt 6:27](#)). Such a truth should not make us fearful, since we serve a *loving* heavenly Father ([Mt 7:9–11](#)). Instead, realizing our contingency and frailty should make us humble, conscious of our moment-by-moment dependence on God. Sometimes this dependence should be expressed explicitly by voicing the qualification, “If it is the Lord’s will . . .” ([Jas 4:15](#)). But even if that qualification is not on our lips, it must be on our hearts.

Week Five: Read James Chapter 5:1-20

5:1–6 Just as Old Testament prophets sometimes turned to surrounding pagan nations to denounce them (as a lesson in God’s justice and as an encouragement to God’s suffering people; e.g., [Am 1:3–2:3](#)), so James denounces wealthy non-Christians who are mistreating members of the congregation. One way we know that James addresses outsiders here is that he gives no offer of repentance (cf. [Jas 4:6–10,15](#)). These wicked rich people have defrauded their workers of fair wages ([5:4](#)), hoarded wealth when others were in need (vv. [2–3](#)), and lived in shocking self-indulgence and luxury (v. [5](#)). By failing to provide for the poor through almsgiving and by paying fair wages, these rich people have, in essence, “condemned and murdered the innocent” (v. [6](#); cf. [1Ti 6:17–19](#)). The wicked rich will answer to the Lord Almighty ([Jas 5:4](#)).

5:7–11 As Christians wait for the Lord’s return and their vindication, they are to be like patient farmers waiting for the rain or harvest. In times of injustice, oppressed people can easily turn their frustration against one another. Don’t do it, warns James! Grumbling and complaining (not just economic oppression from the wicked rich, vv. [1–6](#)) will receive its divine recompense (v. [9](#)). Christians want to hear the words “Well done, good and faithful servant!” ([Mt 25:21](#)) and not escape as through the flames ([1Co 3:15](#)). Job provides an especially poignant example of faithfulness through severe trial. Though he suffered greatly, Job never succumbed to his wife’s temptation to “curse God and die” ([Job 2:9](#)). And at the end of Job’s trial, God restored him and said to his false comforters, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has” ([Job 42:7](#)). Yes, Job did cry out greatly in distress, but faithfulness through trial does not mean the absence of lament.

5:12 “Above all” should probably *not* be taken as introducing the most important teaching in the letter. Instead, the Greek words translated “above all” are an idiom signaling that the conclusion of the letter is near. Using language directly parallel to Jesus’ teaching on oaths ([Mt 5:33–37](#); [23:16–22](#)), James affirms that a Christian’s speech must be characterized by complete

honesty. In employing oaths (e.g., "swearing" by heaven or earth), a person implies that they may not speak the complete truth if they are not under oath. Thus, the very taking of oaths is flawed because it implies the lack of truthfulness in daily speech. Most Christian scholars affirm that taking oaths in certain civil settings, such as testifying in court, does not violate James's command. The main issue is that a Christian should be completely truthful in all their speech.