

# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 1 Agenda

- Read silently James 1:19-21 and 3:1-12.
- Journal for 3 or 4 minutes on things that cause you anger; reflect on how you manage your anger.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Close the lesson by journaling for 2-3 minutes on the challenges of James and how you may struggle with them as you move through the letter during the next few weeks.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Anger
- Function of the human “tongue”
- “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” — James 3:11 (NIV)

*This study was prepared by Kendra McKinney, a Duke Divinity School student who was an intern at the General Board of Church & Society.*



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## The Power of Words

*Scripture readings: James 1:19-21 and 3:1-12*

### Introduction to James

This New Testament book provides a guide to daily living. Its message is universal and reaches people of various faith systems. As you embark on your study of James, prepare your minds and hearts for a life-changing experience. “The Letter of James” speaks to how we are to create a community that reflects the values of Jesus Christ and the United Methodist teachings as shown in the denomination’s Social Creed.

Through weekly study you will be invited to consider how community lifts up every body. I offer these studies to you based on my growing love for the challenges James offers us today, and as I struggle to live out that message as a student at Duke Divinity School.

### Lesson Objective

Words matter: How we speak to one another makes a world of difference. In the beginning was the Word and through it creation was born. If movements for social change are to gain momentum, time ought to be spent encouraging and supporting one another, not only with our deeds of mercy and justice, but also with words that reduce harm and encourage peace.

### Life Application

- In 1:19-21, James speaks avidly against anger and how it hinders us from forming a relationship with God. James suggests a solution that may not always be easy to practice. How does the image of “implantation” embolden us to believe and act as if we are endowed with a power beyond ourselves that can overcome conflict and encourage just peace?
- In 3:9-12, James discusses the dichotomous function of the tongue with great disappointment. How often do we use our tongues to build others up or to tear them down? James asserts that the tongue corrupts the “whole person.” How does your experience reflect James’ insight?
- How were words used to heal and to harm in your family? How are they used to heal and harm in the communities closest to you?
- The United Methodist Social Creed says, “We affirm the natural world as God’s handiwork and dedicate ourselves to its preservation, enhancement and faithful use by Humankind.” How do our words, tone of voice or even our silence affirm the goodness of God’s creation?

### Closing Prayer

O Wise God, help me to live a life in pursuit of achieving mercy, compassion and justice in the world around me. Help me to discern when others need to hear words of encouragement and true concern for their life’s struggles and circumstances. Send your Holy Spirit to rest in my spirit so that my words always express your love. Amen.

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# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 2 Agenda

- Read silently James 1:13-18, 4:1-3 and 4:7-10.
- Journal for 3-4 minutes on one of the Key Words, Verses or Concepts.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer.

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Sin
- Perfection
- Humanity's position in the created order

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## Sin: An Obstruction of Justice

*Scripture readings: James 1:13-18, 4:1-3 and 4:7-10*

### Introduction to James

Have you ever wondered why we do bad when our intentions are to do good? Or, have we ever blamed God for some wrong that we might have done? In this passage, James addresses these questions and prompts us to think about the process one undergoes when making moral decisions in daily life.

### Lesson Objective

This week's focus is on sinful behavior. We are asked to think about how sin affects the ways in which we interact with those around us. We will examine ourselves and participate in a lesson that gets at the heart of Christian inactivity in a world that desperately needs faithful action.

Our confession in the United Methodist Church Social Creed is this: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God's gifts, and we repent of our sin in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends."

In the same spirit, James advises us not to be consumed by sin, but to work out our salvation. With God's help, we can eliminate discord within ourselves and injustice in the world around us.

### Life Application

- In what ways does sin distort the ideal picture of society? How does our society distort our understanding of human sin?
- Does James provide an antidote for society's social sins? What might James say to the specific social sins of your community and our world?
- In Chapter 4 verse 1, James attributes external conflicts between people and groups with internal conflicts that divide our attention and destabilize our sense of self. Is there a connection for you between external justice in the world and internal peace in your spiritual life?
- What role does God play in the prevention or intervention to stop the proliferation of evil in the world? What role do humans play? How can recognizing personal flaws help one to be able to identify the flaws of humanity?

### Closing Prayer

Gracious God, I humble myself, acknowledging that I am imperfect and with sin. I am so thankful for the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, which gives me hope each day. Help me to identify my weaknesses and flaws so that I can be a better servant to your people. Amen.



# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 3 Agenda

- Read silently James 1:5, 1:13-18 and 4:4-6.
- Journal for 3-4 minutes on one of the Key Words, Verses or Concepts.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer.

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Generosity
- “God cannot be tempted by evil, and [God] doesn’t use evil to tempt others.” — James 1:13b (CEV)
- Friendship

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## James’ Doctrine of God

*Scripture readings: James 1:5, 1:13-18 and 4:4-6*

### Introduction to James

“The Letter of James” has often been misunderstood as lacking theological content, especially a lack of an emphasis on Jesus Christ; many disagree, however. This week you will explore the ethical commitments to do good and pursue justice that flow from a centrality of our claim that Jesus Christ is Lord.

### Lesson Objective

Knowing who God is helps us more closely to conform to God’s will. Without an intimate understanding of what God wills for the world, how can we reflect that will in our choices? We must discern what is good even as we strive to do what is good. The effect of this intimate knowledge of God resonates throughout every part of human life.

The United Methodist Social Creed says, “We believe in the final triumph of God’s Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life in the gospel in the world.” This lesson will ask us to explore how understanding God’s nature and will helps us to do justice in the world.

### Life Application

- For James, God is generous, constant and friendly. Why do you suppose James focuses on these elements of God’s nature?
- Often James mentions God’s generosity and how God will give if asked; this generosity is conditional and reciprocal, however. What does this say about the relationship we form with God? What should this relationship look like?
- In learning about God, a relationship is formed. How can we display this relationship with the divine in our lives?
- John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement. He believed that Christians ought to strive toward perfection, meaning that we ought to seek to be perfect in expressing our love for God and neighbor. How does James’ focus on who God is relate to Wesley’s hope that we might live a more perfect life?

### Closing Prayer

Mother and Father of all living beings and things, thank you for creating me for your glory. This act of love and thoughtfulness is the driving force of my relationship with you. Wherever I have come short of fulfilling my part in our relationship, forgive me. Show me how to improve my humanity in a way that pleases you. Amen.



# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 4 Agenda

- Read silently James 1:22-25 and 2:14-26.
- Journal for 3-4 minutes on one of the Key Words, Verses or Concepts.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer.

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Justification by faith alone
- Righteousness
- “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.” — James 2:19 (NIV)

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## I have faith. I have works.

*Scripture readings: James 1:22-25 and 2:14-26*

### Introduction to James

People often refer to the James epistle when talking about “faith without works being dead.” Many have argued that James’ argument stands in opposition to a theology of justification that says by faith alone we are saved. But perhaps these are complementary understandings of how God works in the world. What do you think?

### Lesson Objective

Knowing who God is helps us more closely to conform to God’s will. Without a doubt, it’s true that the life of a Christian is made whole by faith *and* good works. This week we will deal with passages that speak directly to this truth. Think about the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ life was about what he did for humankind. Jesus ministered to the poor, he healed the sick, and he associated with the outcasts and marginalized. Jesus’ life was full of works that supported his beliefs.

### Life Application

- Good works are so significant to James that he goes as far as to say that people “deceive” themselves when they have faith unaccompanied by good works. To illustrate this, he references Abraham and Rahab, two completely different figures in the Bible with varying agendas and faith. Why do you think he does this? How does using these particular biblical figures further emphasize the importance of action in conjunction with an existing faith?
- “Your faith is made complete by your works.” James says that

pursuing good works — acts of mercy and acts of justice — completes our faith. What do you think James means when he says faith is made “complete” in works?

- Have you been guilty of living comfortably with your faith without faithful activity? Did you then change your ways to live in full recognition of your calling as a Christian? Describe the two different lifestyles. How can belief in God and a desire to be God’s hands and feet in this world transform the status quo of your community and the world at large?

### Closing Prayer

Everlasting God and the Sustainer of my being, you are faithfulness. And I acknowledge you today. Even in my inadequacy, you never cease to be true to your promises so that your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I want to be like Abraham and Rahab today, doing and not just believing. My Christian actions can produce a change in this world that can turn frowns into smiles and sickness into health. I want that for myself and others. Be my guidance and my strength so that I can live out what I proclaim to believe in. Amen.

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# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 5 Agenda

- Read silently James 2:8, 2:14-16, 4:11-12 and 5:13-17.
- Journal for 3-4 minutes on one of the Key Words, Verses or Concepts.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer.

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Accountability
- Intercession
- “There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?” — James 4:12 (NRSV)

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## Who is my neighbor?

*Scripture readings: James 2:8, 2:14-16, 4:11-12 and 5:13-17*

### Introduction to James

Who is my neighbor? Our answer to this question conveys our understanding of Christian fellowship and love. We remember how Jesus responded to this question. How we view the people around us determines how we will treat them.

### Lesson Objective

When we lack love for our neighbors, it hinders us from performing peaceable actions in the world and doing justice to others. When we fall short of meeting our neighbor's basic human needs, harm is committed. This lesson will challenge us to think about the role we play in our world and how we act towards our neighbor. Is God pleased with how we live with those around us?

The United Methodist Social Creed says, “We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the glory of God and the good of themselves and others and in the protection of their welfare.” Working for the good of others is part of our civic and Christian duty. It is not enough to live just for ourselves. God calls us to tend to the concerns of our brothers and sisters in love, taught to us by Jesus Christ.

### Life Application

- James 2:14-16 echoes Luke 10:25-37, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Read this parable and imagine yourself in the roles of the Good Samaritan and the person who has been robbed. Where do you see yourself in this story? Where would you place others in this story?
- The “Love Commandment” is universal. How does James use this commandment in his letter when discussing the “law”? How is it effective?
- James says there is only one Judge,

but human nature teaches us to judge one another. As imperfect judges, how does this obstruct the justice that we are called to do in the world?

- The United Methodist Social Creed also states that we believe “... in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining, and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress.” How do each of these examples of human action promote love and concern for your neighbor?

### Closing Prayer

Most Gracious God, teach us your selfless way. Show us how to love our neighbor, whom we have seen so that we can say with assurance that we love you, whom we've never seen. Breathe serenity on our situation today. Amen.

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# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 6 Agenda

- Read silently James 1:9-11, 2:1-7 and 5:1-6.
- Journal for 3-4 minutes on one of the Key Words, Verses or Concepts.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer.

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Rich
- Dispossession
- God's "chosen"
- "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?" — James 2:6 (NIV)

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## Poverty and Wealth

*Scripture readings: James 1:9-11, 2:1-7 and 5:1-6*

### Introduction to James

It has been said that churchgoers are concerned about the wrong things these days. Church is not about God's business anymore. The focus has shifted onto the people. Economic disparity causes division and elitism to spread within church walls. James speaks out strongly against this social sin. In sharp words, he expresses his opposition to segregation, discrimination and prejudice, issues that confront us daily as a church and as Christians.

### Lesson Objective

As demonstrated in Jesus Christ's ministry, regard for the poorest of our society is essential to the livelihood of the community. Christ was an advocate for the oppressed, and is ultimately our model for how we should treat those in our society who are in the margins. Christ also promised to raise up the poor and bring down the low in order to achieve justice in the world.

The United Methodist Social Principle on poverty states that "...the majority of the persons in the world live in poverty. In order to provide basic needs ... ways must be found to share more equitably the resources of the world." It is important that we begin to share the wealth that God has endowed the earth with so that no one goes hungry, no one is without shelter and no one is without clothing.

### Life Application

- James wants to reduce the level of disparity between the rich and the poor. He sees the model of the church where some live with more economic privilege while others do without as an indictment of the church. How do we see the relationship between rich and the poor in our society? Do you agree with James that the poor are in a higher position in the eyes of God, while the rich are in a low position? Why or why not?
- God has always shown a deep "preference" for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the captive. Jesus Christ demonstrated these same concerns in his ministry. This love for the marginalized summons us to choose compassion and even more pursue justice. Why are Christian communities sometimes reluctant to respond to these calls? How is James 5:4 relevant to your church?
- James does not hide his disappointment in the lives that the rich have chosen to live. In 5:1-6 he practically serves them a death sentence. How do you respond to James' conviction?

### Closing Prayer

This earth does not belong to us. We have been lent it to live out God's promises and purposes for our lives. Lord, forgive us for taking in vain what is not ours and furthermore, for not sharing. Show us how to live in a way that benefits all of your creation. Amen.

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# A Study of the Letter of James

## Week 7 Agenda

- Read silently James 2:12-13 and 3:13-18.
- Journal for 3-4 minutes on one of the Key Words, Verses or Concepts.
- If the lesson is discussed in a group, the facilitator may encourage members to share from their journals. Take 7-10 minutes for these reflections.
- Read the scripture passages again.
- Reflect on the Life Application questions.
- Meditate on the Closing Prayer.

### Key Words, Verses or Concepts:

- Forgiveness
- Compassion
- “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” — James 3:16 (NIV)

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## Love and Mercy

*Scripture readings: James 2:12-13 and 3:13-18*

### Introduction to James

James has been about being doers of the word of God and not just hearers. This means that life as a disciple of Christ rests on demonstrating our beliefs by what we actually do. We proclaim that we love our neighbors, but have we considered what this entails? In short, it entails being merciful and fair, modeling our interaction with others after activity. We must acquire divine wisdom, learn compassion and be forgiving.

### Lesson Objective

This week you will look at what God requires of us. We are called to do something. And at the center of our ministry must be love and justice. Whether you are involved with HIV/AIDS, hunger relief, environmental justice or peace-making, God’s wisdom ought to infuse our good works.

Feel free to look at the United Methodist Social Principles to make this topic relevant to your personal life. Also the Social Creed states, “We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults, the aging, and people with disabilities; to improvement of the quality of life; and to right an dignity of all persons.” Is this affirmation not grounded in love and mercy?

### Life Application

- Is it possible to demonstrate acts of mercy without love? Think about the Parable of the Persistent Widow in the Gospel of Luke. What is the relationship between love and mercy?
- Justice is reconciliatory in nature. If it is genuine, it is not affected by temporal things and stands firm regardless of the conditions. How does this type of justice acted out in love in which God and Jesus Christ exemplify teach us how to be merciful?
- Love is mercy acted out in justice. How can you or your community demonstrate this love to a woman with children who struggles with her electricity being cut off? It means a Living

Wage. For a person who struggles with homelessness? It means Affordable Housing and the Housing Trust Fund. For a person who wrestles with mental illness? It means Healthcare Equity. For a person dealing with job loss? It means addressing the problems of Globalization. For an undocumented immigrant trying to make a living for her family? It means Immigrant Rights. For persons of color who suffer racial discrimination in society? It means Civil Rights. For persons who suffer because of their faith? It means Religious Freedom. Evaluate the proposed solutions listed in light of love being mercy acted out in justice.

### Closing Prayer

Oh God, you are the true Judge. The one who is never impartial, seeing the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of your people. We are called to be agents of change in a world that so desperately needs it. You have called us to be ambassadors for Christ. This means showing love, justice and mercy. Show us how. Let each experience of our lives with others be teachable moments that we may be students of your grace. In Christ always. Amen.

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