

# LEADERS GUIDE


# WISDOM

*from Above: the book  
of James*

A stylized magnifying glass with a white handle and a light blue frame is positioned over the letter 'O' in the word 'WISDOM'. The lens of the magnifying glass is filled with a pattern of small, light blue dots, mirroring the background pattern of the central panel.

JOHN D. MORRISON

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DR. TOM SMILEY, SENIOR PASTOR

Wisdom from Above

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The Book of James

John D. Morrison, PhD



*Wisdom from Above: The Book of James*

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# A Letter from the Senior Pastor

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Greetings! Welcome to a new year. Over the course of 2020 we are going to be learning about biblical wisdom. We all want to live wisely and we all want to make wise decisions. We all look back on moments or events in our lives and wish we would have done things differently. At

times, we all wish “we knew then what we know now.” But the real question is, “How can I know the wise thing before I do it?”

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” God teaches us in his word that we should go to him for true wisdom. The writer of Proverbs says, if you want “to know wisdom and instruction,” then start here: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” In order to live a truly wise life, you and I must look first to God. The wisdom of God is often different than the wisdom of the world. Think about Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” In other words, the message of the cross of Jesus Christ is foolishness in the world’s eyes, but to Christians the message of the cross is the perfect wisdom of God. Where the world sees the death of a man, the Christian sees the depth of the love of God. Where the world sees the end of life, the Christian sees the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you want to know what true wisdom is, you must ask God. And if you want to live a truly wise life, you have to live it by God’s standards and not the world’s standards.

To live wisely before God, you must prepare yourself for how the world will push back against you. Remember what God said in 1 Peter 2:15, “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” Therefore, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5–6). To be wise in God’s eyes means to worship and honor him first, and it means to look to Jesus Christ who is God’s true wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Over the course of this year we are going to immerse ourselves as a church with God’s wisdom. I’m excited that this year there will be a new “element” in our study. Each week you will have an activity to do or a devotional to read and write your own notes. I write in my journals all the time. I encourage you to write in yours and make this a memorable year. It will be great to look back on what the Lord taught you over the course of this year, or even to pass along to your grandchildren one day. Also, we will be memorizing Scripture together as a church. Check out the book for the verses and follow along.

Will you join me on this journey to live wisely and honor God first? The title of our study is Wisdom 2020. Of course, 2020 is the calendar year of our study, but it is also a reminder that like 20/20 vision, true wisdom means “Seeing Life Clearly through the Lens of Scripture.”

May God bless you as we journey this year through the biblical theme of wisdom.

Dr. Tom Smiley

Senior Pastor

Lakewood Baptist Church

# Introduction

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The book of James is at once one of the most loved books of the New Testament and one of the most challenging. James does not mince words. He directly addresses what it means to follow Jesus in this world. He fills his letter with vivid images that capture the imagination. James leaves no doubt how followers of Jesus should live, and so the question becomes whether or not we will heed his challenge: “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (1:22).

## Author

In 1:1, the author identifies himself as “James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The consensus for the church throughout its history has been that this James is James the brother of Jesus. He is the James who presided over the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and whom Paul met a few years after his conversion (Gal 1:19). This James was a key leader in the early church in Jerusalem.

There are strong reasons to support the belief that James the brother of Jesus wrote this letter. The book identifies its author as James (1:1), and given our belief in the truthfulness and authority of Scripture, we affirm that this is true. For the author to identify himself only as “James” and expect for people to know who he is means that he was well-known in the early church. There are three people named James identified in the New Testament: James the Son of Alphaeus, James the Son of Zebedee (brother of John), and James the brother of Jesus. Most commentators agree that James the Son of Alphaeus was probably too little known to only sign his letter “James” and expect to be known. James the Son of Zebedee was well known in the early church, but he was killed by King Herod about AD 44, which is probably too early for him to have written this letter (Acts 12:2). The content and situation of the letter match with what we know about James the brother of Jesus. His role as a leader in the early church in Jerusalem fits the situation of the letter, and there are a number of similarities between the language in this letter and James’s language in Acts 15.

## Setting & Purpose

James writes “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). Most likely, he is writing to the Jerusalem church who was scattered after the stoning of Stephen and the persecution that followed (Acts 8:1). James writes to this congregation who has scattered to encourage them in their faith. As they left Jerusalem and settled in new areas, they faced more adversity. Such hostility leads James to exhort them to in the face of trials (1:1, 12). Part of the persecution they faced seems to have been economic and legal challenges (2:6). Their opponents were pressing on their economic and legal advantages to oppose those who followed Jesus.

Into this situation, James calls upon his readers to remain steadfast in their faith (1:12, 5:11). Furthermore, he challenges them to continue to mature in their faith and display the wisdom that is from above (1:4-5, 3:13-18). They must live and act in a manner that accords with the teachings of Jesus: their faith must work (2:14-24). In the face of persecution, these believers were tempted to compromise with the world (4:4). James calls them to reject such friendship with the world, to remain steadfast in their faith in Christ, and to grow into maturity as followers of Jesus.

## Truth for Today

James proves to be a remarkably practical book. It is incredibly easy to apply to our lives. As we apply this book, we should particularly keep truths in mind. First, James builds his call to godly living on faith and a relationship with God through Christ. His calls to action are to the church—people who have been redeemed through the grace of God and the work of Christ. Knowing God through Christ comes before any call to live out that faith. We need to ground all application of this book in the gospel. We can only live out this book through the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Second, we should notice how similar our current day is to the situation facing the first readers of this book. While we may not have been scattered from our homes by persecution, we do face the same temptation to become friends with the world in order to lessen our offense to the world. James will not let us off the hook. Our speech and how we treat others must line up with our confession that Jesus is Lord. We cannot show partiality as the world does, honoring those the world sees powerful and influential and marginalizing the poor and voiceless. We love our neighbor as ourselves when we show no partiality. He warns us about our desires to plan and to control the future as if we were God. He condemns for seeking safety and security in our wealth rather than in the Lord. Rather than seeking friendship with the world, believers must remain steadfast in their faith and live in a manner that honors God. James writes to believers who are tempted to lessen their commitment to God for the sake of the world’s approval. Surely, we feel the same pressure today. By God’s grace, may we hear the words of James to the church and be doers of these words.



## James & His Readers

- Acts 15:1-35 & Galatians 1:18-24 — Who was James who wrote this book?
- Acts 8:1 — Why does James speak of these believers as being in the Dispersion? What has led to their being scattered?
- Why do you think the NT will speak of believers as being sojourners and strangers in this world? How should that identity shape how we live in the world?

## Count it All Joy

- 1:2-3 — What reason does James give in these verses that we can count trials as “all joy”? What truths about God’s character help us face trials with joy? Consider how James describes the Lord in 1:17-18.
- 1:3-4 — What is “steadfastness”? How do trials help produce this? What will be the result of steadfastness? Compare James’s discussion of steadfastness here and in 1:12.
- 1:4-5 — Notice the question between “lacking” in v. 4 and “lacks” in v. 5. What is the wisdom that James speaks of here? Why does James remind us of God’s character in these verses?
- 1:6-8 — Why is it so important to ask in faith? What does it look like for you to ask in faith?

## Trials and Temptations

- 1:9-11 — Notice that both poverty and affluence are counted as trials by James. How can wealth be a trial for people? How does James call on the rich and lowly to act in light of eternity?
- 1:12 — What is the reward of remaining steadfast? How does one remain steadfast? Consider Philippians 2:12-13 and how both God and the believer must act in sanctification and perseverance.
- 1:13-15 — Where does James point to as the origin of sin? What do you think James would say to someone who says, “The devil made me do it”? If James is right, how do we need to fight sin?

## The Father of Lights

- 1:17 — What does James teach about God’s character in these verses? Why is that good news in light of his previous discussion of temptation?
- 1:18 — Why is it important that our salvation originates in God’s will? How is that a comfort for us?
- 1:18 — What does it mean that “he brought us forth by the word of truth”? What is the “word of truth”? What implications can we draw from this verse about our role in evangelism and the importance of it?
- 1:18 — What does it mean that believers are “firstfruits”? Compare with other uses of this word in the NT: Romans 8:23, 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, and Revelation 14:4.



## Quick to Hear

- 1:19 — Why is being slow to speak important for hearing well? Where in your life do you need God's grace to help you be slower to speak (either out loud or to yourself)?
  - 1:19-20 — Why does James connect speech and anger?
  - 1:21 — What is this “implanted word”? Why must it be received in meekness? Why must one put away filthiness to receive it?
- Considering what the implanted word is, how have you been slow to hear and quick to speak when it comes to the truth of Scripture? What is an area of biblical truth and its application that the Lord has been bringing to your attention recently?

## More than Hearers

- 1:22 — James calls upon believers to not only receive the Word by hearing but also to put it into action. Why is hearing but not doing self-deception?
- 1:23-24 — What stands out to you about this image? What has the mirror of the Word been showing you about your life recently?
- 1:25 — What is the law of liberty that James describes? Does “law of liberty” seem paradoxical to you? How does the gospel both free us and call us to action?

## Doers of the Word

- 1:26 — James turns to some specific applications of how to do God's Word. Why is control of the tongue such a key indicator of spiritual maturity? Consider Matthew 15:10-20.
- 1:27 — Why is care for those in need so important for followers of Jesus? Where can you look for more opportunities to care for the most vulnerable in your community?
- 1:27 — Reflecting upon this first chapter in James, where are some areas in your life that are stained by this world? By God's grace, what is specific step you can take to turn away from such sin?

# No Partiality

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JAMES 2:1-13 | WEEK 25 GROUP GUIDE



## Partiality

- 2:1-4 — What is the partiality that James describes in these verses? What are some dividing lines in our world today along which people show partiality?
- 2:5 — How does the gospel undercut the sin of partiality?
- 2:6-7 — In the context of James's readers, why was their partiality so absurd for them? Is there a way you try to appease the surrounding world by showing favoritism or capitulating to their thinking?
- Where are you tempted to show partiality or favoritism in your own life? What is one step that by God's grace you can take to begin to overcome such partiality?

## Royal Law

- 2:8 — What is James referring to as the "royal law"? Why is this command royal? See Matthew 22:34-40.
- 2:9 — How is showing partiality a violation of the command to love your neighbor as yourself?
- Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus turns the question of who is my neighbor on its head. Jesus challenges us to ask instead: how can I be a neighbor to those in need? Where do you see someone in need? How can you help him or her?

## The Whole Law

- 2:10-11 — Why is this such a stern warning for those who would refuse to love their neighbor? Why does it say to us if we would hold onto any ounce of partiality in our thinking?
- 2:12 — Do people in the church need to be concerned about God's judgment? What would living in light of the judgment look like?
- 2:13 — Why is mercy so important for us to exhibit as followers of Christ? From whom have you been withholding mercy? How can you show that person or those people mercy this week?





## Faith Works

- 2:14 — Why does James insist that faith must be put into action?
- 2:15-16 — How does this example point to the necessity of faith coming alive in action?
- 2:17 — James understands that it is easy to say you believe something, but the proof is in if you live what you say you believe. James has strong words for such a works-less faith: it is dead. How is what James encouraging in these verses different than saying you must live in a certain way to be right with God?

## Abraham's Active Faith

- 2:18 — James is combatting a belief that a mere profession of faith is evidence of genuine faith. Have you ever seen someone make a decision for Jesus and then quickly walk away from that profession? What do you think led to that? Consider the people under your influence: how you working to help make them become disciples of Jesus rather than merely making a decision for Jesus?
- 2:19 — How does this example of what demons believe support James's argument here?
- 2:20-24 — How does James use the example of Abraham? Compare with Paul's words in Romans 4:1-4. How do these two teachings of Scripture fit together? Consider also Galatians 5:6.
- 2:25-26 — How do these two verses reinforce what James has already taught?

## God at Work in Me

- How is James not teaching that we can be made right with God through our works? What is the basis of our right standing before God?
- 1 Corinthians 15:10 — How do Paul's words in this verse help explain why it is that the believer will put faith into action?
- Galatians 5:22-24 — Who is at work within each believer to bear this fruit?
- How are good works actually the evidence of God's work in a person, not of that person's inherent goodness?
- In light of all that James teaches in these verses, what is a specific step you can take to put your faith into action this week?

# Tame the Tongue

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JAMES 3:1-12 | WEEK 27 GROUP GUIDE



One way that faith must be put into action is through speech. How we speech should be in line with our faith in Jesus Christ. This unit connects back to James's warning in 1:26:

*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*

## Teachers

- 3:1 — In a church, teachers and preachers are often the ones who do the most speaking. James has a stern warning for those who desire such a role: “you will be judged with greater strictness.”
- 3:1 — Compare this with Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 3:1 that it is a good thing to desire to be a pastor (and by extension a teacher of any kind in the church). Is there someone in your life that you should encourage to put their gift of biblical teaching to work in the church?
- Proverbs 18:21 — How do we see the power of life at work through biblical teaching and preaching?

## Christian Maturity

- 3:2 — One who can control his tongue is “perfect,” according to James. This word “perfect” corresponds with the language of James 1:4. What is controlling speech such a sign of Christian maturity? How are you doing?
- 3:3-6 — Reflect on the images James employs in these verses. What is the lesson James is driving home? Why does the tongue seem to have so much control on our lives?

## Praise & Cursing

- 3:7-8 — If no one can control one's speech, what hope do we have?
- 3:9-12 — How do these contrasts show the hypocrisy of saying we follow Jesus and yet speaking evil with our tongues?
- Where is one area that the Lord is convicting you about your speech? Look ahead to James 3:17. What is a specific step you can take this week to speak in this way?



## Wisdom

- 3:13 — Look back at James 1:5 and its surrounding context. What does James mean by wisdom?
- 3:13 — How does good conduct show godly wisdom?
- 3:13 — What is true wisdom meek?

## Earthly Wisdom

- 3:14 — How are selfish ambition and jealousy opposed to godly wisdom? How do you see such characteristics being promoted as wise according to the world? Where do you see these evil traits rearing their head in your life?
- 3:15 — According to James, what is the origin of selfish ambition and jealousy? Why should the source of these desires cause us much concern?
- 3:16 — What do selfish ambition and jealousy result in?
- Where do you need to repent of selfish ambition and jealousy? Pray that the Lord would reveal these sins in your life, ask a trusted fellow believer to help you uncover such sins, and pray for the Lord's forgiveness and grace to repent.

## Wisdom from Above

- 3:17 — How does James describe the wisdom that comes from God?
- 3:13-18 — Compare this list to Galatians 5:16-26. How are believers able to live in step with godly wisdom? Who is at work in our lives?
- 3:18 — What results from living in accordance with God's wisdom?
- What steps can you take this week for your life to be more marked by purity, peace, gentleness, openness to reason, mercy, good fruits, impartiality, and sincerity? Which one of these is most missing from your life?

# Foolishness and Fighting

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JAMES 4:1-12 | WEEK 29 GROUP GUIDE



## God's Wisdom

- What is the connection between 4:1-12 and the preceding section in 3:13-18?
- How do selfish ambition and jealousy lead to the fighting James describes?
- Where do you need to turn from selfish ambition and jealousy in your own life?

## Sources of Fighting

- 4:1-3 — According to James, what causes problems among people in the church? How can the source of those problems be changed?
- 4:2 — When James writes, “You do not have because you do not ask,” what does he mean? Who should they be looking to as the source of all good things (1:17) instead of trying to grab them for themselves?
- 4:3 — Even if they were to ask God, why would God refuse to give such gifts to people like this? Are there things for which you prayed that would fall into this category?

## Friendship with the World

- 4:4 — What does it look for a believer to try to be friends with the world? What is James's warning for such a person? Where are you tempted to try to be a friend of the world?
- 4:5 — Is God a jealous God? What Scripture supports your answer? How is his jealousy different than ours?
- 4:6-10 — What response does James outline for believers in response to their fighting and quarreling?
- 4:9-10 — According to James, is there a place for repentance in the Christian life? Do you make repentance a regular part of your life? Why or why not?

## Speak No Evil

- 4:11 — How does this verse connect with the beginning of chapter 4? Why does James equate judging your brother or sister in Christ with judging the law?
- 4:12 — How does the reality that God is the judge and lawgiver guard us against judging our brothers and sisters?
- Where do you need to repent and seek forgiveness for judging someone and speaking evil against that person?



## Planning & Providence

- 4:13-17 — How can planning come from a place of arrogance rather than faith? Are you living in such a way that you act as if you are in control rather than God? What would be evidence of a life lived as if you are in the place of God?
- 4:13-17 — What does planning in faith look like? As you prepare for the future, how can you check your heart to make sure your planning honors the Lord? On the other hand, how can you check your heart to make sure that you are not spiritualizing your lack of responsibility?
- 4:17 — How does this verse connect with James's discussion of planning?

## Dangers of Wealth

- 5:1-3 — Compare these verses with Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6:19-20. What does it look like to store up treasure on earth rather than in heaven? Where have you been tempted to spend on the temporary rather than invest in the eternal?
- 5:4 — Who is crying out against the rich in these verses? Why? If you have employees or oversee others, how would they describe your treatment of them? Are you honoring the Lord by the way you treat those under your care?
- 5:5 — Is your life marked by luxury and self-indulgence or by care for those in need? With "day of slaughter" James likely has in mind the immanent appearing of the Lord Jesus in judgment. In light of the reality that the NT describes our current age as the "last days," does your spending reflect that we live on the edge of eternity?
- 5:6 — "The righteous person" James has in mind is likely the figure of the righteous poor. It is not that the wealthy in the church have gone out and killed a particular person in the congregation. Rather, the wealthy's participation in a system that unjustly takes away land from the poor and refuses to pay them a living wage leads to their deaths. Thus, James condemns the rich who profit off of this unjust system as murderers of the poor, and the poor are helpless against them. Are the luxuries and self-indulgences or your life (5:5) built upon taking advantage of other people? What steps can you take to employ your relative wealth (compared with the rest of the world) for things of eternal significance?

# Prayerful Patience

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JAMES 5:7-20 | WEEK 31 GROUP GUIDE



## Patience

•5:7-8 — In the face of suffering, James calls on believers to be patient for the Lord's coming. Are you eagerly awaiting Jesus's return? Do you find it difficult to be patient for his return? Or, is his return not really a pressing concern for you? Why?

•5:9-11 — How does James describe what patience in waiting for the Lord should look like?

- 5:11 — Where else has James mentioned steadfastness in this book? How have you seen this theme throughout the letter?
- 5:12 — Why does James connect being straightforward in how you speak with patience for the Lord?

## Prayer

- 5:17-18 — James's answer for any situation is to pray. Which of these circumstances do you find yourself in today? How would James counsel you to pray?
- 5:19-20 — What does it look like to bring back someone who is wandering from the truth? Have you ever had anyone do this for you?
- For whom can you commit to pray regularly? Consider setting aside time each day this week to pray for this person.



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