



don't just sit there

the letter from James (part 2)

WISDOM

Wisdom was one of the first themes discussed in the epistle. In the opening paragraph of the introduction James insisted, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God...' (1:5). In keeping with the book of Proverbs and the teaching of Jesus, James views wisdom in ethical rather than intellectual terms. Wisdom involves an understanding of the shape of godliness in God's world. Jesus himself was a teacher of wisdom and the very embodiment of wisdom itself (Matt 11:19; 12:42; Mark 6:2; Luke 2:40). To embrace him, as we do when we embrace his gospel, is to embrace wisdom.

JAMES 3:13-18

¹³ Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

DISCUSSION VILLAGE³ C H U R C H

How would you define 'wisdom' according to James 3:13-18? How does this compare with how we society uses the word?

Have a read of Genesis 3:2-16 & Ephesians 4:26-27. As you read, consider what the devil (the incarnation of someone opposed to God) desires for people in their decision making. How do these verses compare / contrast with James' point in 3:14-15?

From 3:16, what is the connection between 'envy and selfish ambition' and the rise of 'every evil practice'?

We often approach wisdom from an individualistic perspective (which is a good start), but a lot of what James has to say about wisdom plays out in how we engage with others. From this passage, how does the exercising of wisdom (or the lack of exercising) affect our engagement and relationships with those around us? Can you think up examples?

In 3:18, James says that those who practice peace will reap a 'harvest of righteousness'. What do you think this means? (Heb 12:11 and Gal 6:9 might help a little).

LIVING IT

Spend some time considering some of the implications of this passage for our lives, for our community, and for the challenges in our society.

PRAY

Share some things to pray for each other.

Pray for each other and your friends.

REPENTANCE

James 4:1–2 is the central section of the letter. So far, James has urged his readers to avoid favouritism (2:1–13), criticised them for ignoring the poor (2:14–26), warned them about the power of the tongue (3:1–12) and called on them to embrace wisdom (3:13–18). Now he pleads with his audience to repent. James 4:1–12 does not develop a new theme as such; it rather stops, and pleads with readers—ancient and modern—to take stock of the themes raised so far in the letter and make a decision about whether or not they will serve God and one another.

JAMES 4:1–12

¹ What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you?^[a] ² You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your evil desires.

⁴ Adulteresses!^{[b][c]} Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy. ⁵ Or do you think it's without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously?^[d]

⁶ But He gives greater grace. Therefore He says:
God resists the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.^[e]

⁷ Therefore, submit to God. But resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, double-minded people! ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep. Your laughter must change to mourning and your joy to sorrow. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.

¹¹ Don't criticize one another, brothers. He who criticizes a brother or judges his brother criticizes the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one lawgiver and judge^[f] who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

FOOTNOTES

a. Lit war in your members

b. Other mss read Adulterers and adulteresses

c. Or Unfaithful people!

d. Or He who caused the Spirit to live in us yearns jealously, or the spirit He caused to live in us yearns jealously, or He jealously yearns for the Spirit He made to live in us

e. Pr 3:34

f. Other mss omit and judge

DISCUSSION



From 4:1-3, how do you think the pursuit of wealth could have caused such problems in the church?

Why do you think the Bible associates 'discord' and 'hatred' with 'murder' (James 4:1-3; 1 John 3:11-17)?

Some have described 4:7-10 as the central paragraph of the letter. What do you think?

Grace isn't a concept that appears very much in James' letter. But he touches on it here (v.6). What place does grace have in James' thinking?

Given that James has already offered a lengthy treatment of the subject of the tongue (3:1-12) why do you think he returns to the theme here in 4:11-12 after his call to repentance (4:7-10)?

It's hard not to have what we believe shaped by the culture we live in. We often become acclimatised to behaviours and ways of thinking that are foreign to God's wisdom. How do we identify these behaviours and attitudes in ourselves? How do we encourage each other towards Godly wisdom and a Godly life, even when it's counter-cultural?

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PERSPECTIVE

This section can be seen to speak directly to three different audiences within ancient society. The first are the ‘merchants’ (4:13–17), those who had the means and ambition to travel abroad and make money. The second group are the rich (5:1–6) and, in particular, the wealthy land owners who employed people by the thousands and frequently mistreated their labourers. The third group are what you might call the faithful oppressed (5:7–11), that is, Christians who belonged to the great mass of the working and slave classes whose lives were often made hell by the actions of the rich and powerful.

JAMES 4:13-5:12

¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.” ¹⁴ You don’t even know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes.

¹⁵ Instead, you should say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So it is a sin for the person who knows to do what is good and doesn’t do it.

5 Come now, you rich people! Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming on you. ² Your wealth is ruined and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³ Your silver and gold are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You stored up treasure in the last days! ⁴ Look! The pay that you withheld from the workers who reaped your fields cries out, and the outcry of the harvesters has reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts.^[a] ⁵ You have lived luxuriously on the land and have indulged yourselves. You have fattened your hearts for^[b] the day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned—you have murdered—the righteous man; he does not resist you.

⁷ Therefore, brothers, be patient until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord’s coming is near.

⁹ Brothers, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord’s name as an example of suffering and patience. ¹¹ See, we count as blessed those who have endured.^[c] You have heard of Job’s endurance and have seen the outcome from the Lord. The Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

¹² Now above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. Your “yes” must be “yes,” and your “no” must be “no,” so that you won’t fall under judgment.^[d]

FOOTNOTES

a. *Gk Sabaoth; this word is a transliteration of the Hb word for Hosts, or Armies.*

b. *Or hearts in*

c. *Or have persevered*

d. *Other mss read fall into hypocrisy*

DISCUSSION VILLAGE C H U R C H

What's the connection between the three sections (4:13-17, 5:1-6 and 5:7-11) in this passage?

Read the account of the merchant-like woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. What distinguishes her from the figure warned in James 4:13-17?

In your own words what is the purpose of James 5:1-6 within the letter as a whole?

What is the basis of Christian patience in 5:7-11?

Of the three groups identified in this section, which group would you most align yourself with? Why? What does James have to say to you? What responsibilities does that leave you for how you engage with other groups of people?

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RESTORATION

In the final two sections of the letter, James issues some parting instructions about how to respond to the joys and pains of life (5:13–18), before concluding with an encouragement to keep the teaching of this letter alive in the congregation long after the scroll was rolled up and the page closed (5:19–20).

JAMES 5:13-20

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they should pray over him after anointing him with olive oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will restore him to health; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The urgent request of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect. ¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours; yet he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit.

¹⁹My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰let him know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins.

DISCUSSION

With James 5:13 and Colossians 3:17 in mind, what place should singing have in our Christian lives?

Keeping in mind James' understanding of faith, what is the connection between prayer and faith in 5:15?

What is the connection between sin and sickness in 5:15? How can this teaching be abused / misunderstood? How do we go about understanding if then?

What comfort for us is there in James' words about prayer? What rebuke / challenge is there for us in James' words about prayer?

How do you suppose James envisages believers 'bringing back' those who have wandered from the truth? We will all know people who have been in this situation. What's our responsibility towards them, and what isn't?

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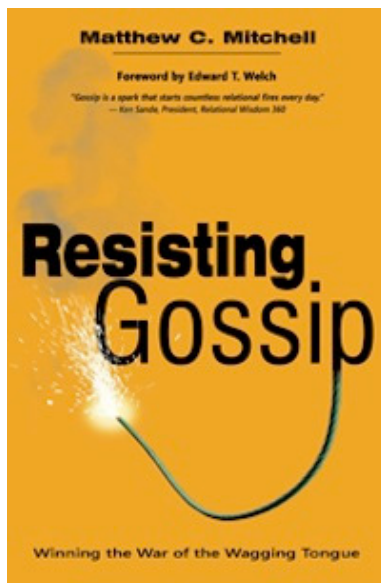
THINGS TO READ |

The majority of questions in these studies come from John Dickson's book which is out of print, 'James, the wisdom of the brother of Jesus'. It's a great book, and if you can buy it somewhere, do. It's easy to read and got some great insights.

If you're looking for something a little meatier, then grab Douglas Moo's commentary on James ('The letter of James', Pillar NT Commentary). Doug Moo is my favourite commentator.

The bible text in these studies is from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, and used within copyright. It's a good translation that strikes a good balance between holding closely to the text, while being readable.

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If you're looking for a book to read as a group this term, here's my suggestion. 'Resisting Gossip' by Matthew Mitchell. This is an issue that James picks up on in his letter, and which is something which can be incredibly alluring and destructive in communities.

You can pick it up on Amazon Kindle for around \$12. It's something worth reading not just by yourself, but as a group you can talk about it with.

Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness.

(James 3:13)