

HTC HOME GROUP MATERIAL – SPRING 2008

Introduction

This term we are looking at the book of James. James is one of the most practical books in the New Testament and will touch on lots of issues relating to our everyday lives. It is easy to read, though he has a very abrasive style, which probably relates to his Jewish background (his language is sometimes a bit like the Old Testament prophets), and the very serious problems that he had observed in the churches he knew. He does not write to one particular church though, as 1:1 makes clear.

The author is widely believed to be James, the brother of Jesus. He was not a believer during Jesus' earthly ministry, but became one after the resurrection. He was for a long time the leader of the Jerusalem church and was one of the most widely respected of all the early church leaders. He spent a lot of time with both Peter and Paul. The letter is probably one of the earliest New Testament books written, but the author shows he is familiar with a lot of the teaching of Jesus that was subsequently recorded in the four gospels. He is clearly Jewish, but also has a good knowledge of Greek and of Greek and Roman culture and literature. James, the brother of Jesus, was martyred in AD62.

Our aims

This is an opportunity for us to really get to know a book well, and to help us get more out of the term's sermon series, which runs in parallel. It also gives us the opportunity to think about a lot of practical issues of Christian living.

I have tried throughout to point us to connections between different passages, so we can see how James builds his argument, and the coherency of the whole letter. We will also see from the six studies though that the letter explores several diverse themes, all of which relate to the problems James had observed in the churches he knew.

Some of James' arguments are complex, and the questions have been carefully written to make the text as easy as possible to understand. But this will require hard work, and every bible study will far better if group members prepare beforehand (at the very least, reading the passage several times, and thinking about what you see as the main points James is making). And always pray that God would help you understand what you are reading, by his Holy Spirit, and help you apply it into your own lives. This does not happen as a matter of course, as 1:22-24 reminds us! Crucial in this making sure you pray through what you have learnt afterwards (which can be lost if groups move straight onto intercession). It is also very sensible to take notes, if you want to remember what you have learnt.

And for those who like to finish things.....

If you wanted to do an extra bible study, either as a group or on your own, you could finish the letter by studying together 5:7-20 and answering the following two questions:

- (i) What does James add in this section that is new?
- (ii) How does it connect with the themes of the previous chapters?

This could more than fill a 40 minute discussion, and would enable you to tie together all that you have done over the series, and help you see the coherency and flow of the letter as a whole.

In addition, Mike Harle has prepared a separate optional activity (following the success of last term's material), which can equally been done as a private reflection in group members' own time. It is based on Study 4 though, so would be best done towards the end of the term.

Further help

I have marked what I believe to be the 'core' questions with asterixes. Please try hard to at least cover these in your studies.

To give you help with trickier parts of the text, relevant cross references have been suggested for some questions. We likewise have copies available of the Bible Speaks Today commentary on James, and would encourage every small group to purchase one and make it available to whoever is leading the study each week. You will find some parts of the letter difficult to follow without it.

I would also be very happy to receive email queries or to chat about the material, at any time. So please do pass on questions your groups would like answering, requests for additional help, comments on what you have learnt, or any other helpful feedback on how you are finding the material. I also want to visit as many groups as possible, so please do invite me to join you!

My email address is tomdarwent@holytrinityclaygate.org.uk, or I can be reached via the church office (01372 463 603).

Have a good term!

Tom Darwent
December 2007.

STUDY 1: TRIALS AND JOY (JAMES 1:1-12)

Introduction

Icebreaker question: “No pain, no gain”. To what extent is this true of athletes? What types of pain do they endure, and how does it benefit them?

James’ big theme in this passage is the potential positive effects of trials, and our need for wisdom if we are to experience these benefits. He likewise points to how an eternal perspective can transform our experience of the present. Clearly these were pertinent issues for his readers.

READ JAMES 1:1-18

- 1) * What does ‘trials’ mean here? How counter-cultural is James’ exhortation in v2?
- 2) * How are perseverance and maturity developed in us by enduring trials (vs 3-4)? What does this suggest James thinks the goal of a Christian’s life should be?
- 3) What is the connection between our main goal in life and how we can experience joy?
- 4) * What goals do Christians have, in your experience, which they allow to take priority over the goal of v4?
- 5) * What difficult experiences have increased your perseverance and maturity?
- 6) * Verse 5 is linked to vs 2-4. So why would someone who is struggling with trials need to ask for wisdom? What does ‘wisdom’ mean here?
- 7) Verses 6-8 are about Christians who are not single-minded in their desire to see God’s goals for their lives accomplished. They hold on to their own separate goals so that they continue to compete with God’s goals for priority. This is why such a person is described as ‘double-minded’ (v8). Why does James say such a man “should not think he will receive anything from the Lord”?
- 8) What sort of ‘trials’ is James addressing in vs 9-11? Explain how James thinks the rich and poor should respond to their respective circumstances.
- 9) What is the ‘crown of life’ James talks about in v12? (See 1 Corinthians 9:25). How significant a motivation is that for us? Is there anything we could do to make it more so?

Conclusion

James' wants to transform the state of mind of his readers, by showing them that their trials are an opportunity for spiritual growth. However, the ability to recognise this comes from wisdom. If people are struggling to see things this way, they should ask God for wisdom and it will be given to them. The implication is that this is a prayer that is always answered. However, to then receive the blessing of this wisdom, they have to not retain their old way of thinking alongside this new perspective – which James calls being 'double-minded'. Seeing the 'big picture' also helps us in dealing with experience of either wealth or poverty.

Reflection

Is it 'pure joy' to you that you could become mature and complete? If that is not the desire of our heart, James urges us to ask God to give us wisdom – and thus the ability to see things from his perspective. In what situations in your life do you need his help to see things in this way?

STUDY 2: TEMPTATION AND PURITY (JAMES 1:13-27)

Introduction

Icebreaker question: Are temptations inevitable?

Just as trials are a fact of life, we all struggle with temptations, even if they take different forms for different people. But James has some very challenging things to say about them, as he does about holy living in general. And his concern is not just that his readers should understand what they should do, but that they should put it into practice. He also says some interesting things about what being 'religious' should really mean.

READ JAMES 1:13-27

- 1) How are temptations different from trials?
- 2) * James has said in vs 1-4 that trials are to be endured (with joy). But what does he think should be our response to temptations?
- 3) * So if God is at work in trials (whether or not he 'creates' them), who is at work in temptations? What are they trying to achieve? What are the respective roles of the Devil and our sinful natures in this?
- 4) How can a trial turn into a temptation? (This is how James thinks we can be deceived, in v16).
- 5) * What does it mean to be "quick to listen"? Why is it so hard to do? What benefits will it bring?
- 6) What is "the righteous life that God desires" (v20)? What light does v21 shed on it?
- 7) * What does it mean to "*humbly* accept the word planted in you" (vs21-22)? How does the metaphor or vs 23-24 illustrate not doing this? Does it ever apply to us?
- 8) What 'freedom' is James referring to in v25?
- 9) * How can we avoid "forgetting what we have heard" (or read) and help ensure we put it into practice?
- 10) What is the challenge of v27 for us today?

Conclusion

James has reminded us of the true origin of temptation and of its consequences, as well as the true origin of all that is good. It is challenging to ask whether we normally perceive what is going on in us and around us with such clarity? Is the Devil instead trying to blur our vision, as well as lower our moral standards?

James also suggests another strategy of the Devil might relate to our implementation of God's commands. He is probably quite happy if we simply hear or read about God's will and then fail to put it into practice. James instead wants us to 'humbly accept' God's word, and so be blessed in what we do – and avoid being polluted by the world.

Reflection

Can you identify any strategies the Devil might be pursuing in your life? What could you do to ensure you more effectively put God's word into practice?

STUDY 3: WEALTH AND STATUS (JAMES 2:1-13; 4:13-17)

Introduction

Icebreaker question: What kinds of things make us favour one person more than another?

Labels are not just found on tinned food or clothes that we buy. We put them on people all the time. Funny or dull. Educated or uneducated. Friendly or cold. Successful or unsuccessful. There are all kinds of ways we can categorise people and our categories can have a profound influence on the way we treat people. As you might expect, James has a few words to say about favouritism. He also has some things to say about our attitudes towards the future, and about what is most important to us.

READ JAMES 2:1-13

- 1) Why is believing in “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (v1) incompatible with showing favouritism?
- 2) * What would be the equivalent for us of the behaviour of v3? How in our church can we find ourselves showing favouritism?
- 3) * Why is v5 a challenge to us when we show favouritism?

READ JAMES 4:13-17

- 4) How would you describe the two attitudes toward the future found in vs 13-17?
- 5) * Can you identify at all with v13? What is the underlying attitude that it reflects, in terms of the goal of our lives? How does this compare with the goal of 1:4?
- 6) Why does James liken us to a mist?
- 7) * What does he think our attitude towards tomorrow should be like?
- 8) Is he saying it is wrong to plan for the future? Explain.
- 9) * What light does Matthew 6:33 shed on all this?
- 10) Are we ever guilty of v16, even if just subtly?

Conclusion

James’ teaching in these passages is a major challenge to the secular, middle class perspective of many people in Claygate. And it raises the question: to what extent has our behaviour been affected by the culture we live in? James points us to the example of Christ and God’s choosing of the poor, to indicate what our attitudes should

actually be like. Equally, he exhorts us to seek the Lord's will rather than making our own plans.

Reflection

Do you unconsciously show favouritism or unfairly label others?

Do you fully seek God's plans for your life, or sometimes simply asking him to bless and fit in with your own plans?

STUDY 4: FAITH AND DEEDS (JAMES 2:14-26)

Introduction

Icebreaker question: It is much easier to talk about God than to obey him. Can you think of anyone you have met in the past who appeared to believe all the right things but who you could not believe was really a Christian? (Keep them anonymous if they were at HTC)!

In this passage, James tells us that true faith is demonstrated by action: we know we truly believe something when it changes the way we behave. Thus it relates to his earlier metaphor of the mirror (1:22-25) and James also appeals to Old Testament teaching about righteousness.

READ JAMES 2:14-26

- 1) * According to James, why is faith without deeds useless (vs 14-17)?
- 2) * What is the connection between these verses and the preceding passage on favoritism (2:1-13)?
- 3) How does this help us apply v16 more generally to our context? Do people have other needs, apart from physical ones?
- 4) * Much needless misunderstanding has come from failing to see that James uses the word 'faith' here in a slightly different way to Paul, and means something less by it, which we could define as simply "believing something to be true". So how does James' example in v19 help us understand what he means when he refers to "faith by itself" in v17? How does this relate to 1:22-24?
- 5) Christians who fail to 'practice what they preach' can be very off-putting to non-Christians, who will see them as hypocrites. If this lies behind the imaginary objection of the first half of v18, explain what this person means.
- 6) * In the second half of v18 James seems to think that the best way he can 'show' his faith to be genuine, is by what he does. Why do non-Christians need to see that our faith produces action? How does it confirm the truth of 1:18 and 1:4?
- 7) * There are obvious parallels here with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). But James turns to two Old Testament examples. How do they support his argument?
- 8) How similar is what James advocates in this passage to what Paul refers to in Galatians 5:6?
- 9) How do you feel challenged by all that we have thought about this evening?
- 10) What should we pray for in response?

Conclusion

James has rightly drawn our attention to the fact that real faith should produce action. If we believe certain things to be true about God and his call on his lives, we should automatically want to live in the light of them. It is about living our lives as if those things are true, rather than as if they are not. This challenges us to think about the consistency of our lives with our beliefs, which is a question of integrity.

Reflection

Do we want to be completely consistent? If we don't feel strongly about it, this is a passion we need to ask God to give us. And do we actually monitor and evaluate our progress? What happens to us when we don't?

STUDY 5: TAMING THE TONGUE (JAMES 3:1-12)

Introduction

Icebreaker question: How do you respond to the adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”?

In this passage, James draws our attention to the incredible power of words: for good or for bad. In doing so, he draws our attention again to the source of evil in the world, and forces us to compare the good we are capable of doing with what we actually do.

READ JAMES 3:1-12

- 1) James gives a warning to teachers in v1. What examples come to your mind of religious teachers whose lives people judged more strictly than others? Why were they judged more harshly?
- 2) * James compared the tongue to a bit and a rudder (vs 3-4). Why do you think the tongue has such control over our lives?
- 3) * James also compares the tongue to a fire and to a world of evil (vs 5-6). What is the point of these two comparisons? In what ways can the tongue poison people and relationships?
- 4) James intends verses 3-6 to have a second level of meaning, by also using it to describe the effects of false teachers on the church community. What point(s) is James making by doing this?
- 5) * What does v6 suggest is a source of evil in the world? (See John 8:44). How does this link with the image of 1:6-8? Are you ever conscious of Satan being at work through people’s words or through the influence of false teaching?
- 6) Verses 7-8 emphasise what a challenge it is to control the tongue. What makes it so difficult?
- 7) In verses 9-12 James uses a series of analogies from nature (springs, trees, vines). How do they highlight the inconsistencies of the tongue?
- 8) * Why does he remind us that all human beings are made in God’s likeness (v9)? What difference could remembering that make to *our* behaviour?
- 9) * James has focussed primarily on the destructive power of the tongue. In what ways can the tongue also bring refreshment and healing? (See 1 Thess. 5:11).
- 10) How can you give God more praise (v10)? How can you give more praise to those you come into contact with each day?

Conclusion

James has caused us to think more carefully about what we say. He seems to suspect that we all under-rate the potential for harm of our words. Again he draws our attention to the sources of good and evil and forces us to compare our behaviour towards others with that of God. Consistency is once more the goal, that we would speak in accordance with what we believe.

Reflection

In what sorts of situations does your tongue let you down? What can you do to ensure you more frequently think before you speak and that you consistently have the right motivations (to build others up rather than self-interest)?

STUDY 6: THE BATTLE WITHIN (JAMES 3:13-4:10)

Introduction

Icebreaker question: Why do people who love each other the most, also often fight the most?

James gets us thinking in this passage about two different forms of wisdom, and two different sets of motives in interaction and in prayer. He forces us to evaluate how we are affected by the world around us and to think more critically about it. He also again reminds of the origin of evil, and that humility before God is the key to godly living.

READ JAMES 3:13-18

- 1) * In 3:13-18 James discusses earthly and heavenly wisdom. What are the characteristics of each? (See Galatians 5:16-26).
- 2) What is “the humility that comes from wisdom” (v13)?
- 3) * What cultural pressures can stimulate envy and selfish ambition in *us*? How is the Devil involved (vs 14-16)?

READ JAMES 4:1-10

- 4) How does v1 connect with 3:9, 1:14 and 1:8?
- 5) The ‘killing’ in v2 may or may not be literal (if literal, it may refer to those who supported violent resistance to the Roman oppressors), but what is clear from this verse is that they ‘covet’. What does this, the ‘wrong motives’ of v3 and the favouritism of 2:1-8 suggest about the readers’ desire for wealth and status?
- 6) * What wrong motives might we have in prayer?
- 7) What does James think is a better way to peace and happiness? What light do 4:6 and 1:5 shed on this?
- 8) * Verse 4 confirms the impression created by 2:1-8 and 3:14-16 that the readers were too influenced by the values of their secular culture. Why does James view this ‘friendship with the world’ so seriously (vs 4-6)? What challenge do you think he would give to us?
- 9) * What promises are made in verses 7 and 8? How encouraging are they to you?
- 10) How does v10 challenge you in your own life?

Conclusion

This passage tells us that our actions are not just an outworking of our faith; they also reveal what sort of wisdom we are influenced by. These wisdoms have very different origins and very different effects. There are clear parallels with Paul's teaching about the battle within a believer between the Spirit and the sinful nature.

James suggests that happiness and fulfilment depends on asking for the right things in prayer. And this in turn depends on wanting the things God wants. Thus only in submitting to God will we be given the desires of our heart. And if we submit fully to him, he assures us that the Devil will flee and God will lift us up.

Reflection

James challenges to think again about what we are really living and striving for. How do you now feel you should change the things you pray for? And in what ways do you feel you have been too influenced by the values and 'wisdom' of our secular culture? What do you need to resist, and in what areas do you need to submit?

FAITH AND DEEDS (STUDY 4) - OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

This activity is intended for private reflection.

1. Over the past 12 months, what have you done that has best demonstrated your own “faith in action”? *The period of 12 months is arbitrary, but a week or month is probably too short a time. Consider all areas of your life: family, social, Church, work, private. Also, take time to reflect on how it felt at the time, and what response (if any) you got from others.*

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2. In the same period of time, what actions have you taken that seemed to separate you from God? *Again consider all areas of your life: where you sense a disobedience or divergence from God’s will, perhaps a sense that you have “let God down”. Take time to reflect on the response from others, and how you sought reconciliation or accepted forgiveness from God?*

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3. What steps could you take to demonstrate “faith in action” in the future? *Think about situations where you sense God is calling you to take action, and what steps would be obedient to that. Take time in prayer, reading and listening to seek out God’s will in the “big issues” in your own journey with Christ.*

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4. How could “separation from God” be replaced by obedient discipleship? What would that need you to do in your own life? *Think about times when we are all consciously disobedient to God’s will? What are the triggers and motivations creating those situations? What would need to replace them?*

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Contemplate these two short Bible passages from Study 4.

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (*Gal 5:6*)

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do (*James 2:18*)

Time for Prayer and Contemplation:

What issues has this reflection raised for you that you wish to lift in prayer to your loving Heavenly Father?

How can you become reliant on His Spirit for guidance and the will to take the necessary steps?

What specific situations need prayer now?