



The challenge to live out the gospel, from James' letter.

Small Group Bible Studies on James

How to be in a small group

Another year, another Bible study group. Time to sign up, turn up and get things rolling for another year. Time also perhaps to ask some questions about your small group. Do you feel as if you just go along because that's what you're expected to do? Does the group have a clear purpose, or does it just exist because it has always existed?

More to the point, what part are you going to play in this year's group? What can you be doing to make the group a success? There are many books and guides and training materials for small group leaders (like *Growth Groups* from Matthias Media), but what about the humble group member? What can each of us be doing to make the most of our small groups?

Why go in the first place?

People go to small groups for all sorts of reasons to fulfil expectations, to make friends, to pursue romantic possibilities, to receive encouragement and counsel, to learn, and so on.

While most of these might be perfectly acceptable reasons to join a small group, the first and indispensable reason must be clear in our minds. Our primary reason for belonging to a small group is to give us opportunity to love and encourage other people in Christ. It's not about Me; it's about Them. And it's about Them because of Christ.

This after all is what the Christian life is about. Our most basic principle is to love other people as Christ has loved us, to lay down our lives for them as Christ did for us. This applies as much to small groups as it does to marriages, families, workplaces, and larger Christian meetings. We go to small groups not primarily to have our needs met, but to meet the needs of others. Of course, we have needs too, and no doubt they will be met along the way—but we can let others worry about that. In fact, paradoxically, the more we focus on loving others, and doing whatever we can for them, the more encouragement and strength we find ourselves.

There are many ways we can love and encourage the other people in our groups. Here are five powerful ones (complete with alliterative titles).

1. The power of presence

This is the simplest and most obvious, but is no less powerful for being so. Just being there each week without fail is a powerful encouragement to the other members of the group. In making the group time a solid commitment, to be missed only in times of emergency, you send a very clear message to the other members: "Being with you matters very much to me. Unless something very important comes up, you can expect me. Encouraging you is a top priority."

Conversely, inconsistent attendance sends a somewhat less encouraging message: "I don't mind coming, but it's not that important. If I feel a bit tired or something else crops up, don't expect me. Being with you and encouraging you isn't really a very high priority for me."

Turning up regularly requires no extraordinary gifts or talent, but it is a powerful way of loving other people.

2. The power of preparation

Most small groups complete their evening's Bible study with a plaintive plea from the leader for people to read the passage and prepare for next week's study. The leader knows full well that most people won't, but there's no harm in trying!

However, preparing for the group time is another powerful way to love the members of the group. Of course, having read the

passage, or done the homework, greatly increases the benefit you yourself receive from the discussion. More importantly, however, it equips you to encourage others by what you say. Rather than throwing in whatever occurs to you at the time, you have actually thought about the Bible passage and the issues that it raises. You are much better prepared to say things that stimulate and encourage and teach others if you have bothered to give it some thought beforehand.

3. The power of prayer

Paul's friend and fellow worker, Epaphras, would have made an ideal small group member. According to Paul, he was always "wrestling in prayer" for the Colossians, that they might "stand firm in all the will of God". Paul was able to vouch that in doing so, Epaphras was "working hard for you" (Col 4:12-13).

Praying for others is hard work, but real work. It is one of the most loving things we can do for our fellow group members, not only because it is through our prayers that God does his work in people's lives, but because it is such a quiet, inconspicuous form of ministry. Making a casserole for someone, by comparison, is much more satisfying—you see something very tangible for your efforts, and you have the pleasure of delivering it to the person and receiving their warm expressions of thanks. Prayer has none of those rewards. You do it for one reason only: that you care for that person and want what is best for them in Christ. And so you pray for them.

4. The power of personality

The alliteration may be starting to stretch a little thin here, but the point is solid enough—that a powerful way of loving others in your small group is to be willing to share your own life and personality with them.

This is by no means an easy thing to do. Many of us would much rather keep quiet and not give too much away. However, by opening up and sharing our lives and thoughts and struggles and joys, we do others a great service. We not only show them that we have the very same struggles that they have (but thought they were alone in suffering); we also encourage them to open up as well.

Of course, it is anything but loving to indiscriminately dump everything we are thinking or feeling onto the group. We need to heed the advice of Proverbs and think carefully before we speak; as well as the words of Ephesians 4: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph 4:29).

5. The power of love

Whatever you do in the group—every word you say, every action—do it for the sake of others. Look for how you can support and help the leader. Look for ways to care for the members of the group—those who could really do with a phone call or visit; those who would benefit from having someone to pray or read the Bible with; those who need financial or other material help; those who just need a friend to have pizza and a video with.

Belonging to a small group can be a very demanding exercise. It can cost us our lives, because that is what it means to be a follower of Christ—to lay down our lives for the sake of others. If we grasp the possibilities, small groups represent an enormously fruitful opportunity for doing just that.



Introduction to James' Letter

The Letter of James was most likely written by James the brother of Jesus. James became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem. James is prominent in the events of the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15.

During Jesus' ministry James probably had little respect for his brother. Mark 3:20-21 says that when Jesus' work began to attract too much attention for their liking, Jesus' family tried to seize him, saying, "He is out of his mind." John 7:5 says that "not even his brothers believed in him."

At some point James did come to understand the gospel. He was known as "James the Just" because of his personal righteousness and his passion to promote righteousness in others. We can see this passion for righteousness in James' letter. He calls the law, "the perfect law, the law of liberty" in chapter 1 verse 25, and "the royal law" in chapter 2 verse 8. Because of this, some people have tried to say that James talks about salvation by works rather than salvation by grace. But James never asks anyone to keep laws regarding food, circumcision, or the Sabbath – the laws that marked the Jews as an ethnic group. James was passionate for the law, but it was not a passion for legal righteousness, it was passion for the law of the gospel of grace and the law of the gospel's king, king Jesus.

James' letter was originally addressed to Jewish Christians dispersed throughout known the world. These Jewish Christians, just like us, were never fully at home in the world because of their faith. For them, just like for us, living their faith was no small thing.

James uses interesting metaphors and illustrations – the billowing sea, a withered flower, a mirror, a horse, a ship's rudder, a forest fire, the taming of animals, a water spring, an arrogant businessman, corroded metal, moth-eaten clothes, and a patient farmer – to urge us not to have a faith that's inconsistent, or only halfway there. He wants us to *do* the good things that inevitably come from wholehearted faith.

James wants those who read his letter to *live out the gospel*, to put their knowledge into practice, and to respond to God's grace with action. It's no good to merely profess to follow Jesus, James says, we must also *live it*.

Study 1; James 1:1-18

Living Faith in the Face of Trials

If we're living out the gospel we'll count trials a joy, because God uses them to grow us to maturity in Jesus!

What do you do when life gets hard?

Read over the introduction to James' letter (inside the front cover of this study booklet). If James wants us to live out the gospel, why do you think he starts his letter with the topic of trials?

Read James 1:1-4

What is James saying in verse 2? What is he not saying?

What do trials ultimately lead to? How does this change your perspective on facing trials?

What does it mean for us to be mature and complete? What trials are you facing right now? Do you think you can count them joy, in the knowledge that God will use them to make you mature in Christ?

Read James 1:5-12

Wisdom enables us to respond to trials in the right way. Discuss the two things we need to do to get wisdom (verses 5-8).

Compare verses 9-11 with verse 12. How do good things in the present compare to the good things that come as a result of persevering through trials?

Read James 1:13-18

What is the alternative way of responding to trials (verse 13)?

In what ways is the process described in verse 14 different to the process described in verse 12?

What great truths does James point out to encourage us not to be deceived (verses 16-18)?

What trials are you facing at the moment? Which path are they leading you down?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 2; James 1:19-27

Live It!

If we want new life to be growing in us, we need to live out the gospel – we need to be doers, not just hearers!

Are you the type of person who spends a lot of time looking in the mirror, or very little time?

Read James 1:19-21

What are we told to do (verse 19)?

Is this just good etiquette, or is there more to it (verse 20)?

Have you had God's gospel planted in you (cf. verse 21)? Is it growing? What do you need to get rid of in order to humbly accept God's gospel?

Read James 1:22-25

What do we do to ourselves if we don't live the gospel (verse 22)? What does this mean?

Why is it foolish to look in a mirror and then forget what you saw? The Bible is like a mirror—it shows us our sin and imperfection, and our need for God's amazing grace (verse 23). Why is it even more foolish to forget what you see after looking into this mirror?

Why is the gospel mirror worth paying attention to (verse 25)?

What is the difference between one who forgets what they look like, and one who remembers (verse 25)?

Read James 1:26-27

If we *think* we're religious and *say* we're religious, but deceive ourselves because we don't *live* our religion, what is our faith worth (verse 26)?

What actions does James say show pure and true religion? How do these actions hint at a real faith that is working it's way through every aspect of our lives?

Having read this section of James today, what real *actions* do you need to take to *live out the gospel*?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 3; James 2:1-13

Favouritism or Mercy?

Showing favouritism is totally incompatible with living out the royal law of king Jesus. Don't show favouritism!

Who do you value most at church? Why?

Read James 2:1-3

What is the command? Who is this command issued to?

Read the example in verses 2 and 3. James is addressing the problem of showing favouritism in the early church. Discuss how we show favouritism at church.

What are the world's standards when it comes to favouritism? Discuss how we become influenced by these standards.

Read James 2:4-7

What do we do when we show favouritism (verse 4)

Who have we dishonoured if we show favouritism (verse 5-6a)?

What's the irony of showing partiality (verse 6b-7)?

Read James 2:8-13

What is the royal law, and how do we break it when we show favouritism (verse 8)?

Are we condemned by the law? Are we examined by the law? How serious the sin of showing favouritism? What does this prove?

If we have truly heard and understood the gospel, how will we *live* (verse 12)?

What will you do to ensure that the royal law triumphs over sin, mercy triumphs over judgement, and love triumphs over favouritism in your actions?

Pray

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Study 4; James 2:14-26

Complete Your Faith

Faith without works is incomplete and it cannot save, but a faith that lives out the gospel is a complete faith!

Have you ever made a statement and then contradicted it with your (lack of) actions?

Read James 2:14-17

What question does James pose in verse 14? What answer does he give in verse 17?

In what ways do we make the mistake James warns against in verse 15-16?

What can you do, to ensure you never leave a brother or sister naked, cold, or hungry (literally or metaphorically)? Will your faith be a dead faith, or will it be a faith that saves?

Read James 2:18-19

Read Deuteronomy 6:4. What is James referring to in the first half of verse 19?

Doctrine is truth about God. If we know good doctrine, but don't live out what we believe, to whom does James equate us?

What state are we in if we say we believe, but don't make church a priority? What state are we in

if we come to church, but mistreat people whom God has commanded us to love? What state are we in if we give generously of our time and money, but don't address our own sinfulness?

Read James 2:20-26

Read Genesis 22:1-12. Compare James 2:21 and Genesis 22:12 – what was it that made Abraham's faith a real faith?

Read Joshua 2:1-16. What was Rahab's profession? What was her nationality? What did she know about God? What made her faith complete?

Verse 24 says, “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (ESV). Does this seem to contradict other parts of the Bible? How do the two mentions of 'works' in Ephesians 2:8-10 help us understand what James is saying?

What can your Small Group do to make sure that together your faith is not dead, but complete?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 5; James 3:1-12

Taming a Restless Evil

Our tongues are capable of utter destruction, so let Jesus tame your tongue!

Have you heard the playground chant, “*Sticks and stones...*”? Is it true?

Read James 3:1-5a

What is the topic of discussion here (James doesn't mention it directly until verse 5a)?

How do the illustrations of horses and ships show what our tongues are capable of?

Discuss some of the things *your* tongue may be capable of doing at church.

Read James 3:5b-12

How does James describe people's tongues? Does this seem a little extreme? Is the tongue capable of any good?

Why are our tongues like this (verses 11-12)?

Is it even possible to 'tame our tongues' (compare verse 2 to verse 8)? Why or why not? (Bonus question: Does this make you scared to open your mouth?!)

Read James 3:13-18

What is the topic of discussion here?

What problems does wisdom address? What is wisdom from above like (verse 17)? What does it achieve (verse 18)?

How do we get this wisdom from above? In the end, is there anyone who can tame our tongues?

To borrow another illustration from James, we've just looked into the mirror (remember chapter 1!) and seen the power of our tongues and the state of our hearts. Now that you've *looked*, what will you *do*? What will you change, to make sure you're living out the gospel of Jesus?

Pray

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What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 6; James 4:1-12

Jealous Grace

Leave behind friendship with the world, and humble yourself before God's jealous grace!

What makes you want to fight?

Read James 4:1-4

Discuss the state of the church James is writing to. What are these people doing to each other?

What has caused the church to be like this (verse 4)?

Is it ever possible *your* friendship with the world could cause these sorts of problems in our church?

Read James 4:5-10

Compare verse 5 with Exodus 34:13-14. What does it mean that our God is a jealous God?

What might our jealous God be expected to do? What does he do instead (verse 6)?

Who does God give grace to (verse 6)? What should we do to ensure we receive God's grace (hopefully you can find at least eight things in verses 7-10)? Discuss how these things are the

opposite of what James saw in the church he was writing to, and how you might put them into practice.

Read James 4:11-12

What do we fail to do if we judge the law?

How is judging your fellow Christians the same as judging the law?

Who is the one lawgiver and judge? What is he able to do?

If Jesus is able to save and destroy, how important is it that we *live out the gospel* of God's jealous grace at church? What will you do to make sure you never act in the hideous ways described in James 4:1-4?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 7; James 4:13-5:6

What Do You Live For?

Living for the gospel is incompatible with living for our ambition, or living for riches!

How do you make plans for your life? What process do you go through? What things do you take into account?

Read James 4:13-17

How does James characterise the way these people are making plans?

What is their ambition causing them to forget?

If the gospel is that we have been saved so that God can work *his* purposes in our lives, is living for our own ambition compatible with living out the gospel?

What does James call this type of gospel-denying planning (verse 16)?

In verse 17 James says that anyone who “doesn't *do it*” (remember 1:23) is sinning. In what ways do you sin by not living out the gospel in the way you make plans?

Read James 5:1-6

Who is James addressing in these verses? Why would James say these things in a letter clearly addressed to followers of Jesus?

When we live for riches we live for our own ambition! When we live for riches who do live at the expense of (verse 4 & 6, see also 1:27)?

How does verse 6 echo the story of Jesus' betrayal and murder at the hands of Judas and the Jewish leaders?

How will living out the gospel of Jesus shape your plans for the future and your ambitions?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 8; James 5:7-12

Patience is (more than) a Virtue

Patience is more than a helpful virtue for a Christian—it's a gospel necessity!

Do you consider yourself a patient person?

Read James 5:7

James tells us to be patient. What are we waiting for?

What would life have been like for a small farmer in Palestine as he waited for the rain?

What is the opposite of patience (don't just say *impatience!*)? What would impatience look like for the Palestinian farmer? What would impatience look like for followers of Jesus?

Read James 5:8-9

What command does James add to the command to be patient?

How would grumbling against one another at church be the opposite of standing firm in the gospel of Jesus?

What are the consequences if we don't remain patient with each other?

Read James 5:10-12

James uses Job as an example of perseverance. Skim over Job 1, and then read Job 42:16. Was Job a patient man?

How did Job's story end? What's the end result if we persevere?

How does the gospel strengthen us to persevere, and help us to be patient with each other?

How will you make patience a gospel priority (rather than just a helpful virtue) in your life?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 9; James 5:13-20

Living a Gospel-focused Life

A gospel-focused life is wholly against sin and committed to God!

In this last part of chapter 5, James reinforces what he's been saying through the whole letter – we cannot just hear this gospel, we cannot just read it, we cannot just know it, we cannot even just understand it – we must *live* it. The truth of the gospel is Jesus died to destroy sin, God calls us to find our salvation in him to the absolute exclusion of all others, and this is a matter of life and death. This is how we live that gospel...

Read James 5:13-16

What kind of healing should we pray for?

Where do we find ultimate physical healing?

What can we do to take getting rid of sin as seriously as James (and the gospel) does?

Read James 5:17-18

James talks about Elijah. Skim over 1st Kings 18, note especially what Elijah says in verse 21, and compare it to what James says in chapter 1 verses 7-8. How are the Israelites in Elijah's time the same as the church James is writing to?

Do you ever fail to be whole-hearted toward God? What does this look like?

What happened as a result of Elijah's prayer?

Read James 5:19-20

Do these verses sound like they are saying that if we bring others to the truth our own sins will be covered over? How does the main idea of *living out the gospel* show us what James is really telling us here?

How seriously should we take sin in the lives of others at church, or in our Small Group?

A church that lovingly prays for each other's sin, and lovingly brings each other back to the truth, is a church that's living out the gospel! Is that the type of church you want to be part of?

What will you do to make our church a gospel-*doing* church?

Pray

What would James want you to pray about?

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What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?