



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

The Center thanks the
Cooperative Baptist Fellow-
ship for its financial support
of these study guides.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

Study Guides for

The Letter of James

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us mine the vivid illustrations, pithy parables, and trenchant sayings of the book of James to discover their transforming possibilities for our discipleship. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- God Gave Us Birth** 2
On a common misreading, the letter of James seems like an awkward misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ. Instead, the letter is an appeal for disciples to become what they are: the firstfruits of a restored creation, set free to live according to God's character.
- Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of "Perfection"** 4
James challenges us to live faithfully, to "be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Such wholeness or completeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith.
- Taming the Tongue** 6
The things that we say or fail to say serve as a barometer of our Christian character, according to James. The ability to master our words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.
- James's Theological Grammar** 8
A theological grammar of James, guided by the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith, can help us uncover the letter's rich Trinitarian theology. It enables a faithful community to mine this sacred text for a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs "every good work."
- Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word** 10
One who hears the Word of God but doesn't act accordingly is like one who "observes his bodily face in a mirror" but turns away and forgets what he looks like. In James's parable, Kierkegaard explains, we learn that Scripture is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives.
- Living as the Friends of God** 12
James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life. This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 God Gave Us Birth
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 11-20)

Suggested Article:

📖 James's Amazing Grace
Gumbo
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 79-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

God Gave Us Birth

On a common misreading, the letter of James seems like an awkward misfit that constantly focuses on works instead of the grace of God through Christ. Instead, the letter is an appeal for disciples to become what they are: the first fruits of a restored creation, set free to live according to God's character.

Prayer

Eternal God, we confess that we want to follow our own, individual paths in life. Yet you show us a different way. You show us what it means to live in a community of faith that cares for those in need. You remind us that a living faith includes faithful deeds. Help us to live in this world in joyful obedience to you, out of gratitude for all that you have done for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: James 1:16-21

Reflection

The letter of James is so full of ethical instruction, it is easy to think it is a good-works-rather-than-grace epistle that ignores the grace of God through Christ and exhorts us to pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps. But that is really a bum rap.

James follows "the threefold pattern of God's covenant with Israel: a choosing done solely by the will of God, a law being given, and later judgment or mercy to be attained on the basis of adherence to that law," but makes subtle adjustments to show "something has shifted within this Jewish framework," Miriam Kamell writes. "James sees God as beginning a new work of creation in the Church. This work is initiated by God's will and sustained by his presence, but now the word has been implanted and the calling is thereby higher and yet truly achievable."

Kamell highlights five themes in James's interpretation of the covenantal paradigm in light of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

- ▶ *Salvation begins with the work of the good and generous God.* We should "not be deceived" about God (1:16): God does not cause temptation (1:13), but gives the good gifts we need but cannot earn—like wisdom (1:5) and redemption (1:18). Kamell writes, "Faith in *this* God, James argues, should make persons generous, for they have experienced such a character of generosity themselves; their ungenerous behavior toward the hungry, therefore, calls their faith into question."
- ▶ *Salvation begins with God's choice.* "Life like this [in a generous community] is not a dream or something gained by a simple grit-your-teeth ethic," Kamell notes, but is given by God "in fulfillment of his own purpose" (1:18a). God gives new life that is brought to "birth by the word of truth" (1:18a); this stands in contrast to the death that is birthed by sin (1:15).
- ▶ *God is doing something new,* remaking us "so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (1:18b). Kamell says this phrase indicates "James's revolutionary thinking," suggesting we are being remade into "something new, different, and indicating a greater fullness to come." The qualifier "a kind of" may reflect



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

“the ‘already/not yet’ nature of this new birth. The believers have been reborn, but still struggle with obedience (1:13-15).”

- ▶ *Individuals can choose to cooperate with God’s grace.* Kamell writes, “James’s theology does not simply end with new birth. The implications of the firstfruit identity are far reaching and require cooperation.” Indeed, we must “welcome with meekness the implanted word” and cooperate with God in eradicating “all sorts of wickedness” (1:21). She notes, “it is not obedience that does the saving; the *word* is what has the power to save souls, but it can reach its effect only when it is received in purity and humility.”
- ▶ *Salvation ends with God recognizing his image in redeemed individuals and communities.* Kamell summarizes James’s view of the final judgment (2:12-13): “Because God is just, when his people live in accordance with his word, God in his justice responds to his people with mercy, not judgment. In the wisdom literature, perfection is never required for a merciful judgment by God, but a repentant heart that seeks to live in accordance with God’s own character receives mercy.”

Kamell concludes that according to James, “those who accept their status as firstfruits . . . find that their character begins to resemble that of their God. Their lives reveal the truth of the implanted word, through their *doing* of it (James 2:22-25); they become people marked by endurance, mercy, and wisdom. The implanted word has the power to save their souls precisely because it transforms them into people who mirror God’s image and he recognizes himself when it comes time for judgment.”

Study Questions

1. How does James exemplify the threefold pattern of God’s covenant with Israel? What adjustment does it make to this pattern in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. For James, what’s the role of good deeds in the Christian life?
3. Consider how “first fruits” is used in Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23. How do each of these passages illumine James’s unusual description of faithful disciples as “a kind of first fruits of God’s creatures” (James 1:18)?
4. According to Mariam Kamell, how does the view of mercy in the biblical wisdom tradition help us understand what it means to be judged “by the law of liberty” (James 2:12-13)?
5. With Thomas Merton’s phrase “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday” as his guide, how does Bert Montgomery find “amazing grace” in James’s choice of Abraham, Elijah, and Rahab to be examples of faith-in-action? What do these selections reveal about James’s understanding of judgment by the law of liberty?

Departing Hymn: “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise him, all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heav’nly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Thomas Ken (1692)

Suggested Tunes: OLD 100th or O WALY WALY



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Faith in Action: An Ethic of “Perfection”
(*The Letter of James*, pp. 21-29)

Suggested Article:

📖 Drawing James
(*The Letter of James*, pp. 48-53)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of “Perfection”

James challenges us to live faithfully, to “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). Such wholeness or completeness demands that we embrace a life where action and faith go together. Our faith must express itself in our actions, and our actions in turn bear witness to our faith.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 1:1-5

Reflection

James’s call for us to become perfect (*teleios*) can make us uneasy, Patrick Hartin admits. It might seem utopian (denying the reality of sin in our lives) or prideful (pretending that we can trust in ourselves and ignore God). Yet the epistle does not shy from the language of perfection when it describes the goal of discipleship (1:14, 17, 25, and 3:2; cf. 2:8 and 2:22).

To get a bead on James’s meaning, Hartin examines how *teleios* was used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Scripture that James and his readers used. Temple sacrifices were to be “without blemish” (Exodus 12:5); by analogy, other aspects of life could be unblemished: for example, Noah was “blameless in his generation” (Genesis 6:9). From an extensive study, Hartin concludes that *teleios* has three dimensions of meaning in the Septuagint: “First, it expresses the idea of wholeness or completeness, of a being remaining true to its original constitution. Second, it refers to giving oneself wholeheartedly and unconditionally to God in the context of God’s people.... Third, such a wholehearted dedication to the Lord is expressed through obedience to God’s will” expressed in the Torah.

As Hartin traces this understanding of perfection as wholeness through the epistle, we begin to see how helpful, even winsome, is James’s depiction of discipleship in community.

- ▶ We are called to be *people of faith-expressed-in-action*. The sort of perfection as wholeness that James commends requires integrity between our beliefs and actions (2:14-18). This is not a replacement of faithfulness with social action. Hartin writes, “In a world becoming more and more secular, the guiding light of faith must enlighten our path forward. James’s stress on the importance of actions is always to be seen as a unity with one’s faith.”
- ▶ We should express this integrity in community through *empathy with the pain of others*. Suffering is not good in itself, but it can be a means of strengthening our faith and perseverance (1:2-4). As members of the God’s family, we should “embrace as our own the struggles and pain of the individual members of that community,” Hartin notes. This is the context for James’s specific warnings against gossip and hateful speech (3:8-9) and dehumanizing day laborers (5:4).
- ▶ We should show *unconditional love for the poor and marginalized*. Shocked by the hypocrisy evidenced by the differing treatment of rich and poor in the community, James asks, “Do you with your



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" (2:2-4). James's graphic parable of showing one's faith through care for the poor (2:14-17) echoes Jesus' parable of the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:37-40). Hartin concludes, "James is a voice for the voiceless, a champion of the poor. He speaks out strongly against any form of discrimination against them. On one thing James is certain: God hears the cries of the poor (5:4) and ultimately James believes that the greedy rich will be overthrown (5:5-6)."

"We live in an individualistic society where we view everything from the individual's perspective," Hartin observes. But, he reminds us, James's call to perfection as wholeness "is addressed to us as members of a community. Ours is the task to rediscover our bonds within the family of the Christian community and to challenge the Christian community as well to remain true to the call to integrity by embracing those values that James stresses: values of equality, integrity, concern for the poor."

Study Questions

1. Patrick Hartin suggests that James's use of "perfect" (*teleios*) is rooted in the Septuagint. How does this Jewish heritage shape the meaning of this key concept in the letter?
2. Hartin identifies three practical implications of James's view of perfection—integrity in faith and actions, empathy with others' suffering, and unconditional love for the poor. How does each one of these exemplify wholeness?
3. How, according to Hartin, does the letter of James's opening address (1:1) introduce the theme of a whole or complete community of believers? Why is it important that James's call to perfection is addressed to us not as individuals, but as members of a community?
4. Artist Paul Soupiset observes, "James has a lot to say to any Jesus-follower interested in issues of missional living, justice, restoration, and peacemaking. His take on the gospel seems to dovetail well with a roll-up-your-sleeves Kingdom-minded theology." How does Soupiset express this understanding of James in *Ex Libris – James the Less*?
5. While Soupiset was sketching the three images of James for this issue, he reflected on the epistle's teaching about "the gentleness of wisdom" (James 3:13-18). What themes from this passage do you find in Soupiset's "liturgical sketches"?

Departing Hymn: "Try Us, O God" (vv. 1 and 4)

Try us, O God, and search the ground
of every contrite heart;
whate'er of sin in us is found,
O bid it all depart.

Help us to build each other up,
each other's walk improve;
increase our faith, confirm our hope,
and perfect us in love.

Charles Wesley (1742), alt.

Tune: DUNDEE



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Taming the Tongue
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 30-37)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

Taming the Tongue

The things that we say or fail to say serve as a barometer of our Christian character, according to James. The ability to master our words is both a metric for and a mark of spiritual maturity.

Prayer

O God, your word to us is the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet too often our words to others are not good news.

We use your gift of speech to boast about our accomplishments. We use our words to speak harshly and to criticize. We put down other people who are different.

Forgive us, O Lord. Help us to choose our words carefully and faithfully, and to use them for the good.

May our words be like fresh water from a spring that gives life, health, and joy. Amen.

Scripture Reading: James 3:1-12

Reflection

To underscore how central to James's ethical instruction is taming the tongue, Todd Still notes "some forty-six of the letter's one hundred and eight verses – an arresting forty-three percent of them! – touch upon 'speech matters' in one fashion or another." If anyone childishy believes "sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," James begs to differ.

Believers must be "quick to hear" and "slow to speak" (1:19), and should back up their careful chosen words with deeds. The famous teaching on faith and works begins: "What good is it...if you *say* you have faith but have not works?" (2:14, italics added).

The letter of James has much to teach us about what we say to one another and how we say it. Still highlights three passages as forming the core of James's speech ethics.

- ▶ *James 4:11-12* warns believers against speaking condemning words of judgment about or to one another. "To do so, James reckons, is tantamount to speaking evil against and judging the law, which in turn places one in the tenuous and untenable position of judging the law as opposed to doing it," Still notes. Rather, believers are to love their neighbors (2:8) and show mercy to them (2:13).
- ▶ *James 5:12* calls for believers to speak truthfully. The dramatic language echoes Jesus' own instruction (Matthew 5:34-37; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:17). The point, Still explains, is "Straightforward truth-telling renders unnecessary verbal props and additional assurances. What is more, it safeguards believers from incurring divine (eschatological) judgment" (cf. James 3:1 and Matthew 12:36-37).
- ▶ *James 3:1-12* is "the most protracted and arresting" instruction regarding speech in Scripture, Still writes. It features three memorable analogies: taming the tongue is necessary for faithful actions just as a bridle is required to control a spirited horse, a rudder is needed to steer a mighty ship, and merely a spark can control (in this case consume) an entire forest. How important, then, is careful teaching within the community (3:1)! Still summarizes, "The tongue (i.e. one's words), James figures, is an exten-



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

sion of one's person, a microcosm of one's character. Herein lies the problem: pure lips require pure lives, but we—like the prophet Isaiah of old—are of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).” The situation, according to James, is dire: “no one can tame the tongue” (James 3:8).

Still notes that “James regards duplicity in general (note his critique of being ‘double-minded,’ or literally ‘two-souled’ [*dipsychos*], in James 1:8 and 4:8) and duplicitous speech in particular to be deplorable. That believers would use their tongues to ‘eulogize (*eulogeō*) the Lord and Father’ on the one hand and to ‘curse those who are made in the likeness of God’ on the other (3:9) scandalizes him.”

Loving and truthful speech is central to the life of discipleship. “Even as a single spring cannot produce both sweet and bitter water, nor salt water become fresh, and even as a fig tree cannot yield olives, nor a grapevine grow figs (3:11-12), neither should those who have received the ‘implanted word’ (1:21)...seek to bless God and curse others,” Still concludes.

Study Questions

1. According to James, how should our love for a generous God lead us to value loving and truthful speech?
2. How do we “speak evil against another” (James 4:11) within congregations today? Discuss whether we speak more or less harshly against people outside the congregation?
3. Why is it difficult for individuals to tame their tongues by themselves? What is the role of the community in fostering truthful, loving, and wise speech?
4. Who are the teachers in your congregation and what influence do their words carry? How can you help them speak with wisdom and love?
5. Discuss the advice for teachers that Todd Still distills from Romans 2:31, Luke 12:48, and Matthew 23:8-10. How does that advice apply to all believers?
6. Consider how Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s hymn “O Lord, May All We Say and Do” reflects James’s instruction on speech. How is it an instance of such speech?

Departing Hymn: “O Lord, May All We Say and Do” (vv. 1 and 3)

O Lord, may all we say and do
reflect the faith we have in you;
for faith is meant to change the way
we live our lives from day to day.

Just as a spark can start a fire,
our words can damage or inspire;
we pray for wisdom from above
to speak and act in gentle love.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2012)
Tune: TALLIS’S CANON



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 James's Theological Grammar
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 38-47)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

James's Theological Grammar

A theological grammar of James, guided by the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith, can help us uncover the letter's rich Trinitarian theology. It enables a faithful community to mine this sacred text for a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs "every good work."

Prayer

Draw near to God,
and God will draw near to you.

**Humble yourselves before the Lord,
and God will exalt you.**

O Lord, help us through our study of your Word
to draw closer to you.

**Help us to be humble
and to seek your way. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: James 2:14-26

Reflection

To gauge the significance of James, we need to ask the right questions. Often we focus on things the letter is *not*: it's not a story about Jesus (like the Gospels), not a soaring theological statement (like Hebrews and some Pauline letters), and not very long. Unsurprisingly, such reflections on "what James is *not*" only make the letter look less impressive in the biblical scheme.

Robert Wall proposes another way of looking at the letter — as a gateway to an important collection in the Bible. He observes, "James stands at the head of the Catholic Epistles, which are the seven New Testament letters addressed to the early Christian churches at large. The theology of James can be an interpretive guide to the other six letters in this collection — 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John (and by extension 2 and 3 John), and Jude."

Wall organizes the theological ideas throughout the letter of James according to five themes drawn from Tertullian's version of the apostolic Rule of Faith. (See Wall's article for Tertullian's wording of these themes.) To illustrate the usefulness of this "theological grammar," we'll briefly trace how each theme illuminates the famous passage on faith and works (James 2:14-26).

- ▶ *The Creator God*. James says the one and only true God (2:19), who made all things (cf. 1:17-18), has created every person in God's own likeness (3:9). Even the demons know such things and tremble; however, they do not love God. "To love God is to do God's will; for life is granted to those who do God's will (4:15)," Wall writes.
- ▶ *Christ Jesus*. James's account of Christ is "underdeveloped," Wall admits. "Instead of more explicit formulations of Christ's coming into the world, James rather says that God sends forth 'the word of truth' into the world (1:17-18) to fulfill the promise of blessing (1:12) and to save God's people (1:21) from the result of their deception and sin (1:13-16), which is death (5:19-20)." Believers are to welcome this "implanted" word (1:21) and promptly do what it requires, as faithful individuals in the tradition as different as Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25) did. Wall writes, "In



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

particular, Jesus received divine approval as the 'glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (2:1) because of his obedience to the 'royal law' (2:8): Jesus loved his poor neighbors, who are the chosen of God (2:5), and resisted their discrimination by the rich (2:1-4)."

- ▶ *Community of the Spirit*. Inevitably a congregation's faithfulness will be tested by forces of evil both within individual members and in the surrounding world. As members struggle with their envy and unchecked desires for pleasure (4:1-10), they may be deceived into thinking "God approves of religious orthodoxy (2:19; cf. 2:8) that is merely confessed but never embodied (1:26; 2:14-17). But the requirements of God's covenant partner are more morally demanding and active than this (2:21-26)." Dangerous forces lurk outside the congregation: "Not only are there rich and powerful outsiders who undermine the community's faith (2:6-7) in order to exploit poor members for their own advantage (2:2-4; 5:1-6), the congregation is surrounded by a 'world' which is God's enemy (4:4)." Faithful communities respond with Christian formation guided by "wise and understanding" teachers (3:13; cf. 5:14).
- ▶ *Christian Life*. Wall notes that, for James, "covenanting with God to receive God's promised blessing is conditioned upon following a pattern of new life exemplified by Jesus.... [Believers] must obey this 'word of truth' —heavenly wisdom—and practice 'pure and undefiled' behavior as the public mark of friendship with God." Instead of a code of right conduct, James commends practices a 'pure and undefiled' congregation performs as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality.
- ▶ *Consummation*. "James centers the community's hope on the event that concludes the biblical story: the coming triumph of the Lord at the end of this age (5:7-9). At this climatic and cosmic 'any-moment,' the eschatological community will be confirmed and vindicated, even as their enemies are judged and destroyed (5:4-6); for God will judge the foolish and bless the wise (1:12; 2:12-13; 4:11-12; 5:5-11)."

Study Questions

1. What does Robert Wall mean by a "theological grammar" for a specific biblical book? Why does he think it must be developed in concert with the Church's Rule of Faith?
2. Which of the five theological themes — the Creator God, Jesus Christ, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation — seem to be most salient in the letter of James? Which are most undeveloped? How do you explain this?
3. Discuss James's account of practices a "pure and undefiled" congregation will perform as acceptable to God: a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality? Why does Wall call these "practices" rather than a "code of right conduct that demands rigorous compliance"?

Departing Hymn: "O Lord, May All We Say and Do"



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word
(*The Letter of James*, pp. 62-69)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word

One who hears the Word of God but doesn't act accordingly is like one who "observes his bodily face in a mirror" but turns away and forgets what he looks like. In James's parable, Søren Kierkegaard explains, we learn that Scripture is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives.

Prayer

Loving God, you teach us that if we are lacking in wisdom, we should turn to you and ask for what we need, because you give to all generously and ungrudgingly. We know that we have so much to learn about your way; open wide your word to us, and give us wisdom to understand the things you want to teach us. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture Reading: James 1:22-25

Reflection

The moral instruction in James comes alive in vivid illustrations, pithy parables, and trenchant sayings. No wonder, then, it was a favorite epistle of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who loved arresting word-play. He took James's parable of the mirror (1:23) as a sly exposé of our strategies to avoid hearing Scripture as addressed to us – like squabbling over the most difficult passages or studying "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries" to indefinitely postpone really hearing what God is saying to us.

Steve Evans summarizes Kierkegaard's insight: "The fundamental purpose of God's Word is to give us true self-knowledge; it is a real mirror, and when we look at ourselves properly in it we see ourselves as God wants us to see ourselves. The assumption behind this is that the purpose of God's revelation is for us to become transformed, to become the people God wants us to be, but this is impossible until we see ourselves as we really are."

Kierkegaard offers advice for reading God's Word properly.

- ▶ *"Look at yourself in the mirror, not at the mirror."* Do not approach the Bible *merely* as a scholar, examining "thirty thousand different ways" of reading each passage. This makes Scripture so "complicated," Kierkegaard says, "I very likely never come to see myself reflected" in it. Should we ignore scholarship? No, but we should not confuse the scholarly stance with the disciples' goal to hear what God has to say. To distinguish these approaches, Kierkegaard imagines a lover who has received a letter from his beloved, but it is written in a foreign language. The lover employs the best dictionaries and grammar books to translate it (the scholar's task), but does not confuse that effort with lovingly poring over the letter to absorb its message (the disciple's stance).
- ▶ *Focus on what you can understand.* Kierkegaard says, "When you are reading God's Word, it is not the obscure passages that bind you but what you understand, and with that you are to comply at once. If you understand only one single passage in all of Holy



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all, but you do not first have to sit down and ponder the obscure passages." He warns against letting worries about the proper interpretation become an excuse for disobedience.

- ▶ *Be alone when you read God's Word.* Do we engage in endless scholarly debates because we fear the Bible "may suddenly and radically change my whole life on a prodigious scale"? Kierkegaard warns against using such debates as a dodge to avoid a personal encounter with what God is saying.
- ▶ *Remember that God's Word is addressed to you.* Recall how the prophet Nathan confronted David after his affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-12:15). Nathan's tale about the rich man slaughtering a poor man's only lamb upset David; but Nathan's point didn't sink in until he said to David: "You are the man." Why not? David knew objective facts, but had not confronted how God's judgment applied to him. Kierkegaard advises us, when we read Scripture, to repeat Nathan's words: You are the one.
- ▶ *Wait silently before God.* Kierkegaard commends a virtuous woman who keeps silent in church (as she was required to do in his day). "As Kierkegaard describes the situation, this silence is not merely for women. Rather, the woman who has learned silence properly has acquired the ability to teach men something they need to learn as well," Evans writes. "We cannot hear God if we are always talking ourselves."

"Some of Kierkegaard's advice needs to be nuanced and qualified," because many people today are not as catechized as Kierkegaard's audience who had a good understanding of Scripture but needed "to make what they knew existential," Evans warns. "However, Kierkegaard is surely right to insist that when God does speak, we must be willing to respond, promptly and with all our hearts."

Study Questions

1. How do the stances of the biblical scholar and the disciple toward reading the Bible coincide? How do their goals differ? Do you agree with Søren Kierkegaard that as educated Christians we may be tempted to confuse these two stances?
2. Discuss how Evans nuances Kierkegaard's advice to make it more applicable today. What part of Kierkegaard's advice is most helpful for you?
3. Consider how more recent information technologies – from inexpensive books to Internet libraries and personal blogs – have influenced your study of the Bible. How do these resources reshape the problem that Kierkegaard identifies?

Departing Hymn: "Be Doers of the Word of God" (v. 1)

Be doers of the word of God, not simply those who hear.
Be ones who look into God's word, obey, and persevere.
Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, too.
Put wrath aside; instead, be meek and let God work in you.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2003)[†]

Tune: ELLACOMBE

[†] Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2009), 69. Used by permission.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Living as the Friends of God
(*The Letter of James*,
pp. 70-78)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

Living as the Friends of God

James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life. This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

Prayer

O God, we want to have our cake and eat it, too: we want to be a friend of the world and still be your friend.

Yet, Jesus taught us: "No one can serve two masters."

Give us strength and courage to get our priorities straight: help us to seek your kingdom first. Help us to live faithfully and joyfully in the world, and to be friends with the people you call us to serve. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Scripture Reading: James 3:13-4:8a

Reflection

Just as Abraham was properly called a "friend of God" (2:23) because his works exemplified his faith, likewise James envisions the Church as "the community of the friends of God called to embrace, imitate, and re-present Christ to others by witnessing the ways of Christ in their everyday lives," Paul Wadell writes. "To enter into friendship with God, James assures us, is not to be introduced to a cozy and always reassuring life; rather, it is to become part of a community... characterized by mercy rather than judgment (2:13); deep concern for the poor (2:15-16); patience in suffering (5:7-11); solicitude for the sick (5:14-15); and fraternal correction (5:19-20)."

Wadell explores James's vision of the Church by examining how a life of friendship with God was understood by Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

- ▶ *Christian communities, like good friends, share "one heart and soul."* Augustine's rule of life for communities makes Christ the foundation and center of members' lives together. They might not agree on everything. But rooted in mutual love for God rather than competing with one another for "status, prestige, wealth, celebrity, and possessions," Wadell notes, they live with "love, kindness, truthfulness, patience, faithfulness, and compassion" rather than "deception and mistrust, harshness and animosity, and discord and negativity."
- ▶ *God's love calls us into friendship with God.* Thomas Aquinas taught that we are created for intimacy with God. Wadell explains, "We find joy when we seek and delight in God's good just as God seeks and delights in ours. That is the language of friendship, and for Aquinas it is the most fitting way to understand the Christian life. We who are the children of God are called to become the friends of God ... [in] a way of life in which all of us *together* come to love God and all that God loves." God has taken the initiative to incorporate us "into the very life of God so that we can participate in, and be transformed by, the love and goodness of God."
- ▶ *Friendship with God unfolds in love for others.* Friendship is always marked by mutual goodwill and sharing of life around common



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

goods and purposes. "The very offer of friendship testifies that God is committed to our good; however, a true friend of God is someone who seeks God's good as well through a heartfelt commitment to forward God's plans and purposes in the world," Wadell notes. "And we do this, the letter of James suggests, in our care for the neglected members of society (James 1:27; 2:14-17); when we extend mercy rather than judgment (2:13); and when we are 'peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (3:17)."

- ▶ *Friendship with God leads to a distinctive and challenging way of life.* Aquinas identifies six "effects" in our lives of friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. These echo James's description of life together in a congregation. For instance, James says that *joy* characterizes God's friends even during adversity (1:2) when they need patient endurance (5:10-11). *Peace* or concord is a result of embracing "the wisdom from above" (3:13-18). With *kindness* and *almsgiving* they minister to one another's needs (cf. 1:27, 2:15-16). *Mercy*, another product of God's imparted wisdom (3:17), leads believers to show mercy, and because they reflect God's character in this way, they do not fear God's judgment (2:13). *Fraternal correction* reincorporates a member who "wanders from the truth" (5:16, 19).

Wadell concludes, "It is easier to be a friend of the world—and this is an abiding temptation for congregations—because such a friendship asks nothing of us. Friendship with God, however, asks everything of us."

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to be friends with God? Consider how the features of friendship illuminate our discipleship.
2. Should we have qualms about describing our relationship with God as "friendship"? Discuss how Wadell responds to some of these concerns.
3. What does it mean to be spiritual friends with one another in the Church? How do these relationships flow from our friendship with God?
4. What are the six "effects" of friendship with God, according to Aquinas? How are they reflected in the letter of James?

Departing Hymn: "The Master Has Come, and He Calls Us" (v. 3)

The Master has called us in life's early morning,
with spirits as fresh as the dew on the sod;
we turn from the world, with its smiles and its scorning,
to cast in our lot with the people of God:

the Master has called us, his sons and his daughters,
we plead for his blessing and trust in his love;
and through the green pastures, beside the still waters,
he'll lead us at last to his kingdom above.

Sarah Doudney (1871)

Tune: ASH GROVE

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

God Gave Us Birth

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan	Dual Session (#1)	Dual Session (#2)
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 2:21-26; 5:16-18
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss “James’s Amazing Grace Gumbo”
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how the letter of James emphasizes the gracious activity of God in Jesus Christ that brings salvation.
2. To explore the role of God’s mercy in judgment “by the law of liberty,” according to James.
3. To consider why James presents Abraham, Rahab, and Elijah as exemplars of faith-in-action.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” locate the familiar tune OLD 100th or O WALY WALY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“With its very clear directives on how to pray, what one should and should not say about the future, how to anoint with oil one who needs healing, and a strong emphasis on social action toward the poor, hungry, and outcast, James’s letter can come across as perhaps the most legalistic book in the New Testament,” Bert Montgomery admits. Yet then he notes the unlikely figures that James holds up as exemplars of righteousness: an old man who fell down laughing at God’s plan, a once-cowering prophet, and a woman with a sketchy past—who stand before us not in their own merit, but due to their grace-filled response to God’s call. Thus, if “we take the time to savor the flavor like a Cajun making gumbo, because James stirs in a heaping amount of Abraham, a good sprinkling of Elijah, and just a pinch of Rahab, we will taste the richness of grace in which everything else rests,” Montgomery concludes. “A reckless reading sees legalism, but a hearty bite tastes grace through and through” (*The Letter of James*, 82).

In this study Miriam Kamell guides us to the passages in James where the theology of God’s grace that undergirds the entire epistle, including its choice of edifying figures, is most clear.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 1:16-21 from a modern translation.

Reflection

We begin our reflection on the moral instruction in James by exploring how this epistle grounds our discipleship in the gracious activity of God in Jesus Christ. Miriam Kamell explains the rich metaphors in James 1:16-21, and Bert Montgomery examines James’s unusual choice of moral exemplars. They deflect two criticisms: that James teaches we are saved by good works, and that salvation is entirely an individual affair. The letter declares that it is written by “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1), but it

gives us no further information about who this is. We can gather from the letter's contents that he must have been an important Christian leader who embraced his Jewish roots. Many scholars believe the author is either the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:8), who in Christian tradition has been called James the Just, or someone who identifies with this figure. Kamell and Montgomery help us understand how he draws on his Jewish heritage to explain our discipleship of Christ.

If your group would like to extend their study of the role of grace in the letter of James to a second session, you might explore James 1:16-21 in the first session and then discuss James's account of judgment and choice of exemplars in the second session.

Study Questions

1. Mariam Kamell summarizes God's covenant with Israel: "God, of his own free will, chose Israel and made them his people in love. The correct response to such love from God would be love demonstrated through obedience. God promised immense blessings for obedience, but disobedience brought oppression in its wake. This was not a capricious punishment on God's part, however. Israel was called to be an image of God... and this calling was to be made possible because of God's choice of and presence with Israel."
Similarly, James says believers were given birth "by the word of truth"; this was done "in fulfillment of [God's] own purpose" that they "become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). Believers will be judged on whether they respond in faith and actions that reflect this generous, merciful nature of God (2:12-13). James adjusts the covenantal pattern when he says the word has been "implanted" in believers' hearts (1:21). Kamell writes, "Here we see the first hint that James has moved into a new covenant theology, affirming the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34."
2. Kamell writes that according to James "it is not obedience that does the saving; the *word* is what has the power to save souls, but it can reach its effect only when it is received in purity and humility." To live out their new identity – as people in whom God has implanted his saving word – requires their willing obedience (James 1:19-22). This reveals they have been reborn in the image of the generous, merciful God. "James does not teach salvation by works," Kamell concludes, "but a salvation made possible by obedient preparation for the word to work, reflecting the teachings of Jesus."
3. Assign small groups to study Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23. As the people tithed first fruits, they expressed gratitude for God's gifts of the land (Deuteronomy 26:1-3) and rescue from Egypt (26:5-10), and generously shared their bounty with the poor (26:11-12). The tithers became emblems and enactors of God's grace. The Apostle Paul describes the resurrected Christ as himself the first fruits; his resurrection is an emblem of God's mercy and it extends that new life to all believers. Discuss how, according to James, believers have been given new life through "the implanted word" in order to become both emblems and enactors of God's grace and mercy.
4. Kamell notes the reciprocal nature of mercy in the wisdom tradition: the wise are shown mercy by God and, in turn, they are merciful. This is captured in Jesus' beatitude "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Linking the "law of freedom" by which believers are judged with the "word of truth" that birthed them, Kamell writes, "Judgment will be done *according to the same entity* as that by which we are saved.... That encouragement, however, is paired with the equally strong warning of the necessity of mercy...[for] a lack of mercy indicates a failure of fruit from the implanted word, and reveals us as self-deceived as to our status."
5. Bert Montgomery suggests that James's choice of Abraham, Elijah, and Rahab as exemplars of faith-in-action requires a gracious memory of their lives. None of these characters are "pure" through and through, and their exemplary actions follow closely on their grateful obedience to God's gracious call. They do not show us how to pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps, but how to respond to God's gracious initiative.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Faith-in-Action: An Ethic of “Perfection”

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the meaning of “perfect” (teleios) in the letter of James.
2. To trace through the letter of James particular implications of perfection as wholeness.
3. To reflect on the depiction of James in the artwork of Paul Soupiset.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Try Us, O God” locate the familiar tune DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Patrick Hartin has more than a scholarly interest in the concern for hypocrisy that permeates the letter of James. For instance, “James’s message of concern for those who are discriminated against resonates very strongly with me,” he writes. “I was born and grew up in South Africa during the Apartheid era. Discrimination against another human person (created in the likeness of God) simply on the basis of the color of their skin was an accepted way of life for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Every aspect of life was determined: where you could live, where you could go to school, whom you could marry, what employment you could seek – all this on the basis of the color of your skin! What is even more horrendous was that the vast majority of the people in South Africa confessed that they were Christian! Faith and action were totally divorced from each other. This same challenge that James identifies lies at the heart of our concerns for our present world where struggles for justice continue that center around overcoming discrimination in the areas of race, gender, and class” (*The Letter of James*, 26).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to lead you to more maturity in your discipleship as you study the letter of James.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 1:1-5 from a modern translation.

Reflection

One way to uncover the unity of a biblical text is to track an important theme through its teachings. In this study we follow Patrick Hartin in tracing how the letter of James uses forms of *teleios*, which is usually translated “perfect” or “mature.” James 1:4 announces the theme that believers should become mature.

Hartin suggests the basic meaning of *teleios* in James is having integrity, wholeness, and total dedication. This allows Hartin to draw together James’s famous teaching on faith and works with its more particular exhortations about mutual care, fraternal correction, and concern for the poor. It also suggests a significant way that James draws upon the Jewish heritage, for the word *teleios* is used in the Septuagint to describe “unblemished” sacrifices and, by extension, “blameless” character. Use this study to help members to see the letter of James as a whole and to appreciate the rich Jewish roots of the Christian faith-expressed-in-action that it teaches.

Study Questions

1. Patrick Hartin writes, “The Septuagint used the Greek adjective *teleios* (as well as the adjective *amōmos*) to translate the Hebrew word *tamim*. An examination of these words points to an origin within the Hebrew cult, especially that of the sacrificial Temple worship. Cultic laws required all offerings to be free of any defect, ‘unblemished’ (*teleios*).” The word is used this way in Exodus 12:5 and thirty-seven times in Leviticus, Numbers, and Ezekiel to describe appropriate offerings. This idea of dedicating oneself and the best of one’s possessions to God in grateful appreciation of God’s grace stands behind James’s description of discipleship. “The cultic dimension continues when James says believers hold a special place in God’s plan of creation: they are ‘the first fruits of God’s creatures’ (1:18). This cultic image is a reminder of Israel’s offering of the first fruits of their fields and flocks to God. Against this background, the hearers/readers as the ‘twelve tribes in the Dispersion’ are the first of God’s creatures to begin the reconstitution of God’s people.”
2. Ask three small groups to reflect on one of the implications and report back to the whole group. The first implication – of integrity in faith and action – suggests wholeness and lack of hypocrisy within each individual believer. James seeks integrity of faith among believers (note the emphasis on correction in James 5:16, 19-20). The second and third implications extend this wholeness to relationships among the believers, and toward other people like the day laborers they employ (James 5:4). Believers who integrate their beliefs in God’s generosity into their own actions will mutually support, encourage, and correct one another, and will act with justice and compassion toward all people.
3. Hartin notes that in James 1:1 the word “Dispersion” refers to the many Jews who were forced, originally by warfare and famine, to live outside of Palestine. “The twelve tribes” refers to all the people of Israel descended from the twelve sons of Jacob (Exodus 24:4; 28:21; and 39:14), who had not been united in a twelve-tribe kingdom since the time of King David. Ezekiel 37:21-22 states God’s promise to reunite the people. Thus, James’s opening address “expresses hope in the fulfillment of this twelve-tribe kingdom” through the Church.

The idea that believers will encourage, financially support, and correct one another is central to James’s ethical instruction. As members of a whole or complete community, they will be emblems of God’s generosity to one another and of God’s blessing to the world.

4. In *Ex Libris – James the Less*, Paul Soupiset depicts James holding a Bible which contains the letter he has written. “Words and images interact throughout Soupiset’s work,” Heidi Hornik notes. “Sometimes a word or phrase from Scripture will inspire part of a drawing and manifest itself like an illuminator’s marginalia; other times the emerging image will speak a word to the artist which gets incorporated into the drawing. For instance, while drawing the Bible in *Ex Libris – James the Less*, the phrase ‘ex libris’ (Latin for ‘out of the books’) came to Soupiset’s mind, and he added ‘in vicus’ (‘into the village’) to the phrase to approximate a Jamesian admonition to ‘get out of the books and into the neighborhood.’” These two Latin phrases also appear in Soupiset’s final sketch, *James the Less*.
5. Soupiset says the process of liturgical sketching “allows me to approach the text, the story, with an open hand, with contingency, inviting the Spirit to do what the Spirit will, or won’t. It’s not about the mastery of the texts, but about inspiration, illumination, and contemplating the ancient paths.” He was inspired by the phrase “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:18) to add the seeds and fruit in the upper right corner of *The Seed – James the Less*. These emblems of the “good fruits” produced by “the wisdom from above” reappear in the lower left corner of *James the Less*, but now they stand in contrast to an emblem of judgment – scales of justice superimposed on dead branches.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Taming the Tongue

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see why loving, truthful, and wise speech is central to discipleship, according to James.
2. To consider the difficulty in monitoring our own speech practices and the role of the community in fostering rightly ordered speech.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn ‘O Lord, May All We Say and Do’ locate the familiar tune TALLIS’S CANON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“When former Utah governor Jon Huntsman announced that he was ‘suspending’ his campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, he called upon the remaining Grand Old Party contenders vying for the chance to challenge the sitting President to abandon their ‘current toxic form of political discourse,’ maintaining that it ‘does not help our cause,’” Todd Still recalls. “Truth be told, contemporary presidential hopefuls do not have a corner on the market of ‘rancorous rhetoric.’ If careless, unsavory, slanderous, and hostile speech all too frequently typifies political campaigns, it also weasels its way into Christian conversations and congregations” (*The Letter of James*, 29).

If we struggle to control our speech—and who does not?—then we will be glad to hear James’s good news of the resources that believers have in the Church. ‘Chaste speech,’ Still notes, ‘is a gift to the community.’ But like all good gifts from God, it requires that we welcome it and work to appropriate it in our lives.

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 3:1-12 from a modern translation.

Reflection

One way to uncover the unity of a biblical text is to track an important theme through its teachings. In this study we follow Todd Still in tracing how the letter of James sees truthful, loving, and wise speech as an indicator of “perfection” or “maturity.” The letter returns to issues of speech so often that it seems to be more than just an instance of its call for integrity in faith and works; such speech is an essential structure of the faithful community that James envisions.

Study Questions

1. James sees loving and truthful speech practices as part of our loving response to God’s generosity. Since God’s likeness is in the people we are speaking to, we should speak blessings rather than curses to them (3:9). Furthermore, the motivations for speaking evil against others, speaking boastfully about ourselves

and denigrating others, and so on, are inconsistent with our having received “the wisdom from above” (3:13-18). How can such hurtful, boastful, hypocritical, harshly judgmental, discriminatory words come out of a person who has received the “implanted word” (1:21)?

2. Ask members to list general categories of “speaking evil against others” but avoid describing particular cases. They might list things like harshly criticizing ministers or lay leaders’ beliefs or actions, gossiping about members’ moral failures, unfair politicking for congregational offices, refusing to acknowledge others’ gifts, and so on. None of these practices qualify as the mutual correction in the context of love that James commends (5:16, 19-20).

Ask members to consider whether they are more likely to speak harshly about people outside the immediate congregation—e.g., political candidates, community leaders, people at work, outcasts in the community, members of certain other congregations or denominations, non-Christians, people with opposed political opinions, and so on. Are they sometimes tempted to use church members as sounding boards for their rants against others? How should members respond when they hear another member “going off” on someone outside the immediate congregation?

3. Still writes, “Communion with and faith-filled deeds offered to God do not (only, or even primarily) occur in isolation. According to James, interaction with other believers, not to mention outsiders, should shape one’s sensibilities and commitments. Chaste speech is a gift to the community and a mark of spiritual maturity.”

James says we are often driven by “envy and selfish ambition” to be “boastful and false to the truth” (3:13) and not “willing to yield” (3:17). We may be blinded about or ashamed of what we are doing. If we cannot identify our own base motivations, or we refuse to acknowledge them, we need loving and wise friends to help us know and take responsibility for what we are doing. James commends mutual correction in the context of love (5:16, 19-20). If we have developed bad habits of gossiping, retaliating with harsh words, intimidating others with our speech, and so on, we need friends who remind us what is at stake (4:11-12) and guide us toward speech practices shaped by “the wisdom from above” (3:17).

4. The first congregational teachers we think of are ministerial staff members and leaders in biblical and discipleship study groups (for children, youth, and adults). But, members might think of other “teachers,” such as the artists who decorate the church sanctuary and chapel, the musicians who select and interpret congregational and choir songs, lay persons who lead in worship (by offering prayers, leading children sermons, etc.), those who lead worship in a nursing home or counsel shut-in members, those who visit in the hospital, and so on. Encourage members to reflect on “teaching” in an appropriately wide sense. Discuss how members can encourage, support, and correct one another in their teaching ministries.
5. Since Christian “teachers can lead others astray through that which they say,” Todd Still commends humility and self-criticism (Romans 2:21), seriousness and caution about the mission of teaching (Luke 12:48), and self-understanding of their role (Matthew 23:8, 10). Still writes, “disciples who serve as teachers do well to remember that there is truly but only one teacher and instructor, namely, the Christ...and... take every necessary precaution not to place a stumbling block in the path of other believers, especially the so-called ‘little ones.’”
6. The first verse of Gillette’s hymn announces James’s theme of the integrity of faith and works; the third verse focuses on speech ethics. Expanding on the analogy of the spark which highlights the damage of a forest fire (James 3:5-6), the hymn says “our words can damage or inspire.” The prayer for “wisdom from above” (3:15, 17) is consonant with James’s admission that “no one can tame the tongue” (3:8). The phrase “to speak and act with gentle love” describes speech behavior born of God’s wisdom (3:13, 17) in contrast to the condemning judgment that characterizes much of our speech (4:11-12).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

James's Theological Grammar

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 5:1-20
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Explore the four congregational practices
Question 1	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Question 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the concept of a theological grammar and its relation to the Church's Rule of Faith.
2. To trace five theological themes—the Creator God, Jesus Christ, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation—through the letter of James.
3. To reflect on the congregational practices which are central to James's ethical instruction.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O Lord, May All We Say and Do" locate the familiar tune TALLIS CANON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/). The lyrics to this hymn are printed on p. 60 of *The Letter of James*.

Begin with a Comment

On a first reading, the letter of James may seem to wander about in a disorganized way. It helps to see its teachings in light of the grand narrative that the Church has found in Scripture. Robert Wall orders the epistle's major teachings around five themes—the Creator God, Christ Jesus, Community of the Spirit, Christian Life, and Consummation—to help us uncover its rich Trinitarian theology. He calls the result a *theological grammar*—"a body of interpenetrating theological agreements that help explain what is written...[and] make certain a faithful community mines the sacred text in search of a wisdom that saves and a Christian maturity that performs 'every good work.'"

"While the theological grammar of any biblical composition is constructed from the raw materials the text itself provides, its detection is guided by analogy to the Church's apostolic Rule of Faith," Wall notes. "Scripture's simultaneity, which is otherwise impossible to detect amidst the sheer diversity of its witnesses, is only evinced when the interpretation of all its parts is carefully monitored by this Rule" (*The Letter of James*, 36).

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 2:14-26 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Tertullian introduced the phrase "rule of faith" to describe a list of basic Christian beliefs, and his term caught on among early theologians. "Apostolic" means that the beliefs derive from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Robert Wall employs Tertullian's version of the apostolic Rule of Faith to construct a theological grammar of the letter of James. Space does not allow quoting Tertullian's words in the study guide. As you study each theological theme, ask a group member to read from Wall's article the appropriate sentences from Tertullian's writings.

If your group would like to extend their study of the central theological themes in James, you might reserve the discussion of the four congregational practices – a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality – for a second session.

Study Questions

1. Try this exercise to help members understand a “rule of faith.” What would they say if someone asked them how Christians read and interpret a certain biblical book? They might say: “Christians can learn from how contemporary scholars, modern Jews and Muslims, and other contemporary people read the book, but we bring a distinctive perspective to our reading. We believe it is the word of the God, who is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is present with us through the Holy Spirit. We take the book’s instruction, when rightly understood, as a guide for our discipleship in the Church, where we are growing in love for God in preparation for the glorious fulfillment of God’s kingdom.” Those last two sentences are a brief rule of faith, a statement of fundamental beliefs that govern how Christians read Scripture.

A “theological grammar” employs the rule of faith to organize and illumine the rich themes of a biblical book. So, Robert Wall gathers what James says about God, about the life and teachings of Jesus, about the Spirit in the Church, etc. A scholar might gather and organize insights in other interesting ways – e.g., around themes that appeal to the rich, the poor, or another group, that concern healing or miracles, that reflect first-century patronage systems or views of friendship, etc. – but these would not be distinctively Christian ways of reading. Such strategies would not, in themselves and unaided by the rule of faith, show believers how to integrate the book’s teachings into their common life of discipleship.

2. Form five small groups to study and briefly summarize James’s teachings on each theme. Wall notes that James expands on the generous nature of God as Creator, has much to say about the spiritual development of their community and the nature of their practices (which is the topic of the next question), and concludes with a focus on the coming eschatological judgment. However, according to Wall, the second theme of Jesus Christ is “famously underdeveloped.”

James’s “narrative of God’s redemptive agent differs from the Pauline witness and is largely responsible for the disquiet that James evokes among its Protestant interpreters.” James depicts Jesus as the divine wisdom that through his life and teachings shows us how to obey God’s will. Paul emphasizes how Jesus, especially through his death, proclaims God’s kingdom in a way that calls forth obedient faith in the trustworthiness of that proclamation. Encourage members to discuss how these differences might be explained by James and Paul’s different audiences (Jewish and Gentile) and missions (relating the gospel to the Jewish heritage and introducing the gospel to those not familiar with that heritage).

3. Create four small groups to explore and briefly summarize how each practice – a piety of poverty or powerlessness, purity in speech, rescuing wayward believers from theological and moral error, and hospitality – is developed in the letter of James. Wall refers to these as “congregational purity practices” because “the most important element of the moral universe shaped by James” is that “the community must resist the moral pollutants of the surrounding ‘world’ (or anti-God) order and care for the needy neighbor in accordance with God’s ‘perfect law of liberty’ (1:27; cf. 2:1-13).” Admittedly “the interior life of the individual believer is surely an important feature of this same moral universe,” but it is not the focus of James’s attention. In other words, James highlights what the community does to remain faithful and distinctive from the morally distorted patterns of the surrounding culture.

Departing Hymn

“O Lord, May All We Say and Do” is on p. 61 of *The Letter of James*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To contrast the stances of the biblical scholar and the disciple in reading the Bible.
2. To critically examine Kierkegaard's advice for educated Christians who are tempted to confuse those stances.
3. To reflect on how recent information technologies influence our reading of Scripture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Be Doers of the Word of God" locate the familiar tune ELLACOMBE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

"It is crucially important to distinguish between the attitude of the scholar, who treats the Bible objectively as an artifact to be studied, and the stance of the person who loves God and wants to hear what God has to say about his or her life," Steve Evans writes. Søren Kierkegaard told the following story to make the distinction between the two attitudes clear.

Imagine a lover who has received a letter from his beloved. I assume that God's Word is just as precious to you as this letter is to the lover. I assume that you read and think you ought to read God's Word in the same way the lover reads this letter. Yet you perhaps say, "Yes, but Scripture is written in a foreign language." Let us assume, then, that this letter from the beloved is written in a language that the lover does not understand. But let us also assume that there is no one around who can translate it for him. Perhaps he would not even want any such help lest a stranger be initiated into his secrets. What does he do? He takes a dictionary, begins to spell his way through the letter, looks up every word in order to obtain a translation. Now let us imagine that, as he sits there busy with his task, an acquaintance comes in. He knows that the letter has come, because he sees it lying there, and says, "So, you are reading a letter from your beloved." What do you think the other will say? He answers, "Have you gone mad? Do you think this is reading a letter from my beloved! No, my friend, I am sitting here toiling and moiling with a dictionary to get it translated. At times I am ready to explode with impatience; the blood rushes to my head, and I would just as soon hurl the dictionary on the floor—and you call that reading! You must be joking! No, thank God, as soon as I am finished with the translation I shall read my beloved's letter; that is something altogether different." (*For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990], 26-27)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 1:22-25 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In contrast to his more famous philosophical writings which were attributed to various pseudonyms, Søren Kierkegaard's Christian discourses are direct in communication, accessible to general readers, and pastoral in purpose. They are theology that is witty and fun to read. In this study Steve Evans reflects on Kierkegaard's discourse "What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?" which applies James's parable of the mirror (1:23) to reading the Bible properly in a scholarly age. With the qualifications that Evans suggests, Kierkegaard can help us see our own foibles as educated Christians through the mirror of God's Word.

Study Questions

1. Many biblical scholars are disciples. If your group includes some, invite those persons to share their answers to this question. Scholars and disciples seek true answers to questions about a biblical text, but their questions often are quite different. A scholar might think a question is important (and worth trying to answer) because other scholars are asking it, her students or people in the wider society need to know the answer, it fills a gap or corrects an error in the scholarly literature, or the answer might get published and help establish the scholar's reputation. You can see why understanding how one's answer differs from other scholars' answers, or how it relates to various questions and projects, can be a very important, but potentially unending task. Scholars often have to stop and say "that's enough," but it might seem like their research goes on forever. Disciples on the other hand, according to Steve Evans, read Scripture "in an existential manner, in which one seeks to hear God speak and in particular to understand what God wants to teach one about oneself." In researching scholarly questions about the Bible, we sometimes receive answers to personal discipleship questions, but not always. We might tell ourselves "I'm studying the Bible," but not with the right questions.
2. Evans nuances Kierkegaard's advice to "be *alone* when you read God's word." Kierkegaard wrote for an educated and catechized audience. They knew how the Church read the Bible, but they were not connecting that knowledge with their lives. The situation is different today. "There are many in our society who, whether educated generally or not, lack even basic knowledge of the Bible. There are also those who see themselves as committed to the Bible but who read the Scriptures with little understanding of the Church or the rule of faith. For them God's Word is simply whatever they individually decide God is saying," Evans notes. "They need to allow their individual interpretations to be challenged and corrected by what God's people as a whole have heard God saying. Where a misreading stems from simple misunderstanding of a passage, the commentators can also be helpful."

In a section of the article that is not highlighted in the study guide, Evans critiques Kierkegaard's thinking that God's communication consists solely of commands. "In the Scripture God also tells us about himself and thus makes it possible for us to relate properly to him," Evans writes. "We need to hear God tell us not only what we should do, but also who God is, and who we are in relation to God and God's people. God does not just reveal what we should do, but our true identity, which must shape what we do."

3. Most believers today have access to more secondary writings about the Bible—scholarly and devotional and otherwise—than anyone at any time in history. Much of this secondary material is unsifted, with really valuable contributions buried among many trivial things. The range of materials is so great that none of us feel confident to sift through it all, even if we had the time. How do we help one another as scholars in this situation? More importantly, how do we help one another as disciples? To whom do we turn for guidance in what to read and how to read it? How do we help one another process what we've read? And how do we keep the focus on listening for God's speaking to us through God's Word?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Living as the Friends of God

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To highlight the distinction in the letter of James between friendship with the world and friendship with God.
2. To consider how Augustine and Aquinas develop the idea of friendship with God to describe our discipleship.
3. To relate Aquinas's list of six "effects" of friendship with God to James's vision of the Church.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "The Master Has Come, and He Calls Us" locate the familiar tune ASH GROVE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Soon after his baptism on Easter in 387, Augustine created a small community in which to grow in the Christian life. It included his mother, his closest friend, his brother, his son, two of his cousins, and two of his students. "Like any real community (or any real congregation), Augustine and his cohorts hardly agreed on everything," Wadell notes. "But they were able to live together well because they were joined as one in what they took to be the fundamental calling of their lives, namely, to love God and to grow together in Christ."

"Ten years after his baptism, Augustine wrote a rule of life for Christian communities.... Augustine believed that Christians in their lives together were to love God and be of 'one heart and soul' on their journey to God. Like any good friends, they were to support and encourage one another, seek the best for each other, challenge and sometimes correct one another, and in everything to help one another grow in the way of love. In many respects, Augustine sees Christian community like a choir singing in harmony. Each voice brings its own distinctive gift to the choir; each voice makes its unique but indispensable contribution. And all those voices blending together create something beautiful. As a community of the friends of God, the Church is a choir of varied voices bonded together in love to create something beautiful and rich and hopeful not only among themselves, but also for the world" (*The Letter of James*, 71-72).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 3:13-4:8a from a modern translation.

Reflection

One of the most arresting images in the letter of James is the contrast between the friendship with the world that is a constant temptation for congregations and the friendship with God that is exemplified by Abraham. In this study Paul Wadell sketches how Augustine and Aquinas developed this rich theme of friendship with God in their writings. This is an opportunity to explore the rich interrelationship of historical theology with the biblical text of James.

Study Questions

1. Divide into two groups—one to review James 2:23 and 3:13-4:8a, and the other to review Aquinas's account of friendship with God—and then compare the results of their research.

James says Abraham was rightly called a friend of God (cf. 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8) because he was chosen by God, believed God, and responded in faithful actions. This stands in contrast to the "friendship with the world" which makes one "an enemy of God." To characterize friendship with God, James 3:13-4:8a describes those who receive "the wisdom from above" and the opposing traits of the friends of the world.

Paul Wadell writes, "Aquinas described the theological virtue of charity as friendship with God, a way of life in which all of us together come to love God and all that God loves." He explains that this means God communicates, or shares, the divine life with us, taking us up into the life of the Trinitarian love. Our relationships with one another and the creation are transformed as "friendship with God links us to every man and woman who, like us, is loved by God and called to communion with God; as Aquinas insists, charity makes neighbors of us all. It calls us out of ourselves in love and service to others."

2. Encourage members to identify their concerns. Wadell mentions three: (1) that friendship with God might seem so "abstract" and "impossibly spiritual" that it has "no practical consequences for one's everyday life"; (2) it involves no more than "being thoughtful, nice, or congenial toward others"; and (3) it is a "purely private and exclusively spiritual relationship with God that comfortingly insulates us from the needs of others." He responds by fleshing out the connection between friendship with God and loving involvement in others' lives, especially through the six "effects" of friendship with God.
3. Wadell writes that James suggests we exhibit spiritual friendship "in our care for the neglected members of society (1:27; 2:14-17); when we extend mercy rather than judgment (2:13); and when we are 'peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (3:17)." Furthermore, the list of the traits of friends of God in 3:13-4:8a suggest the quality of relationships in the Church. Wadell notes these transformed relationships with others pivot on our identification with God's gracious activity: "a true friend of God is someone who seeks God's good as well through a heartfelt commitment to forward God's plans and purposes in the world. In a life of friendship with God, we return to God the love, affection, and goodwill that God has shown us by seeking God's will and living faithfully according to the ways of God."
4. "Both James and Aquinas argue that friendship with God, if it is more than vacuous piety, has to be visibly displayed. It must be seen not as an escape from the world and the responsibilities we have for others, but as a distinctive and challenging way of life—indeed, a new kind of existence—identified through particular habits and practices," Wadell writes. Assign to small groups the task of researching the passages in James that are related to the six effects or characteristics of a life of friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. Wadell writes in regard to the first effect, joy: "A community of the friends of God...should always be characterized by joy because God, who is the fullness of our joy, has befriended us in Christ and the Spirit." He suggests peace or concord flows from the believers' focusing on what binds them in common: "As a community of the friends of God, Christian congregations should exude peace because none of their members loves or desires anything more than they love and desire God." On the importance of fraternal correction, Wadell notes, "Fraternal correction reminds us that sometimes love must take the form of challenge, confrontation, and correction. This is done not to deride or diminish a person, but to remind them of who they are called to be as a beloved friend of God."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.