

LESSON ONE
*Christian
Living 101*

FOCAL TEXT

James 1

BACKGROUND

James 1

MAIN IDEA

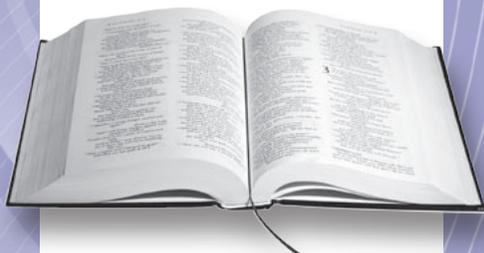
Faith that is genuine calls for action in all the details of life.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Is our Christian faith so real that we live it out in the details of our lives?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to consider how well they are living out the instructions for Christian living in James 1



THE BOOK OF JAMES
Real Faith in Action

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The Letter of James raises important issues for living out faith in everyday life. James's practical and sometimes stark presentation of the rigors of Christian living has caused mixed reactions from Christians. In 1522, Martin Luther's infamous assertion that James constituted "a right strawy epistle"¹ revealed Luther's bias against James's emphasis on works. Luther's assessment led to a neglected status for James, especially among churches that emphasized salvation by grace.

Recent scholarly treatments of James recognize the literary character of the letter as *paraenesis* or exhortation. *Paraenesis* was a common type of writing in the first-century world. It had a definite form and function. As to function, *paraenesis* sought to encourage those who were already believers to live out their beliefs. Writers employed *paraenesis* to exhort and encourage. As to form, *paraenesis* exhibited a particular style and content. It used imperative verb forms, the diatribe (imagined or representative oral arguments), well-known proverbial sayings, and lists of vices and virtues. All of these elements were strung together with little concern for thematic organization.²

Other Bible interpreters suggest that the basic content of James originated in a purely Jewish context. The Christian writer then appropriated the words to exhort his Christian congregation to ethical action. Note that Jesus is mentioned only twice in the letter (James 1:1; 2:1).

In a more general sense, James represents a kind of prophetic wisdom literature. As prophet, James offers blunt exhortations and corrective teaching. In the 108 verses in James, there are about fifty direct commands. James sounds like a prophet in the mold of Jeremiah, Nathan, Amos, or even Jesus. As wisdom literature, James at times sounds like Proverbs, focusing on practical outcomes and the living out of faith. The wisdom tradition is not primarily concerned with wisdom as intellectual ability, but rather wisdom as a gift from God that leads to life lived for God's purposes. In Christian terms, we might speak of the desire for God's wisdom as faith put into action.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Opening Words (1:1)

The salutation at the beginning of this powerful letter constitutes the single element like a letter in the book, and it provides the only meager evidence as to the origin of the letter. The author identified himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³ The designation raises the inescapable question: *Who is this James?* The name “James,” the English form of the name *Jacob*, refers to four individuals in the New Testament: James, the son of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21); James, the father of Judas (Luke 6:16); James, the brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55); and James, the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3). Herod Agrippa martyred James, the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:1–2). His death early on in the expansion of the church makes James the son of Zebedee an unlikely candidate for authorship. Of the remaining choices, only James the brother of Jesus was prominent enough in the early church to command attention when writing. Interestingly, James here did not presume authority based on family relationship to Jesus; rather he identified himself as a “servant,” or *slave*, of God and Jesus.

James addressed the letter to the “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” The normal referent of “the Dispersion” was the Jewish population scattered outside of Palestine after decades of exile and migration. However, this phrase provides little concrete evidence as to the specific identity of the recipients. Along with other elements in the letter, it suggests a primarily Jewish context for the writing. In 2:2, James described the “assembly” of worshipers, using the word for *synagogue*. “Assembly” thus suggests a group familiar with and mindful of Jewish traditions. The recipients likely represented a Jewish-Christian congregation. James’s association with the Jerusalem church and his devotion to Jewish customs (see Acts 15 and 21) likely places this congregation within a Palestinian context. If this is true, James’s reference to his audience as the “Dispersion” presents an ironic situation. These Jewish Christians were not scattered outside of Palestine; rather they were exiled from their fellow citizens and in need of encouraging words for living the Christian life.

Trials Produce Character (1:2–4)

1:2–4. James began his exhortation with a word about “trials,” which is a translation of the Greek word *peirasmon*. In 1:13–15, most English translations render the same word as *temptation*. The primary differences are in how *peirasmon* is experienced. Trials are external difficulties that when positively faced lead progressively to a positive outcome. Testing leads to endurance, endurance to maturity, and for James, this was a reason for joy. By comparison, temptation might be seen as an inward desire gone astray, which yielded to leads to a negative outcome (see discussion of James 1:13–15). Characteristic of *paraenesis*, this progression invites the reader to fill in the content of the progression with personal experience. We each can recognize a part of our own experience in the progression presented. Each experience may be different, but the outcome is the same—difficulties handled properly develop Christian character.

God’s Wisdom (1:5–8)

The transition to an exhortation to desire wisdom echoes various points in Scripture. In part, “wisdom” refers to the common sense practicality of the wisdom traditions represented in Proverbs and other wisdom literature. More importantly, it calls to mind the biblical distinction between God’s wisdom—what James calls “the wisdom from above” (3:17)—and human wisdom (see 1 Corinthians 1:18–25). God’s wisdom has little to do with pure cleverness; rather it speaks to recognizing God’s purposes in the world. James’s advice to those who lack wisdom calls to mind the story of Solomon (1 Kings 3; 2 Chronicles 1), who asked from God wisdom and received it. At the other end of the spectrum, James described the one who doubts that God “gives to all generously and ungrudgingly” as like a “wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.” Jude, the brother of James (Jude 1), employed similar imagery in describing the troublemakers in his own congregation (Jude 12–13).

The final imagery in this section describes the doubter as a “double-minded” individual who should “not expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1:8). This description calls to mind the single-minded focus of one like Paul to God’s plans and purpose (Philippians 3:12–16). This comparison demonstrates that our desire for God’s wisdom is another way of speaking about our desire to do God’s will. To desire

God's wisdom is to recognize our humble position and our dependence on God.

Humble Dependence on God (1:9–11)

A part of doing God's will is humble recognition of our dependence on God. James here introduced an important theme in the letter, which he returned to in chapter 2: *our position before God is not based on our personal economic or social status*. While James encouraged both the poor and the rich to consider their status—the lowly boasting “in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low”—the harshest judgment falls on the rich. It is their status that “disappears like a flower in the field.” James's hard words for rich Christians resonate with Jesus' own warning about how difficult it is for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:23). When we realize that our economic or social status does not matter in indicating our relationship to God, our humble dependence on God becomes paramount. Additionally, the things we imagine are permanent and lasting, James describes as fleeting and perishable.

Throughout chapter 1, James drew illustrative examples from nature to help the reader picture the exhortation. A doubter is like a wave of the sea. Here, riches and the rich are like the fading flowers of the field. In subsequent verses, James compared sinful desire to the process of conception and birth. On a more positive note, he described genuine followers as “first fruits of his creatures” (James 1:18).

Resisting Temptation (1:12–18)

The central section of chapter 1 takes up the issue of temptation and the Christian response to desire gone astray. Again, the primary distinction between *peirasmon* as trial and as temptation has to do with the reaction to difficulty. Trials come from without while temptation comes from within. Trial met positively progresses to character. Temptation yielded to leads to death.

1:12–16. In both instances, the operative exhortation is to endurance. In this instance endurance leads to a reward, but James recognized that some may believe that temptation comes from God. Here it is important

to recognize the link between God-given desires, which are good and life-enhancing, and temptations, which are desires gone astray. James placed the blame for temptation squarely on human desire out of control. Using the powerful imagery of a living being, James compared the progression of temptation to conception, birth, growth, and finally death.

1:17–18. In contrast to desire gone astray, James presented the alternative, which is to recognize that “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above” (1:17). Good things come from God, “the Father of lights,” a phrase that portrays God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of creation. God created the heavens but also is the Father of the light coming to the world. In contrast to the conception and birth of sin, which leads to death in 1:15, here it is God’s purpose to birth us “by the word of truth” so that we become “first fruits of his creatures.” As in the wisdom tradition, there is a way that leads to death and a way that leads to life. James bids us to choose life.

Controlling Speech (1:19–21)

James here introduced another important theme he would expand on later (see 3:1–5). James placed speech within a negative progression that begins with insensitive hearing and ends with inappropriate anger. James also established the relative position of speaking to the far more important activity of listening, which in turn gives way to the more important act of doing. James valued listening over speaking and doing over listening. The listening James valued most centers on the Christian’s meek acceptance of God’s word. James’s use of “meekness” to describe how Christians ought to hear God’s word calls to mind Jesus’ blessing on the meek who “inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). In both instances, meekness describes the controlled strength of a bridled horse attuned to the direction of the rider. But, being attuned to the “word” is just the beginning.

Faith in Action (1:22–27)

1:22–25. James concluded chapter one with powerful words about hearing and doing. These final words remind Christians of the need to hear and do. These words present the content of true religion.

This is perhaps the essential exhortation of James: *for the true Christian both hearing and doing God's purposes are essential*. James compared trying to have one without the other to a person who looks into a mirror and after walking away forgets his or her appearance. It is not that we forget everything about our appearance; rather we may recall a too flattering or too critical picture—an inaccurate assessment of who we really are. James observed that when we hear the word without acting on it we erroneously imagine we are better Christians than we might actually be. In contrast, James bids us to stare into “the perfect law, the law of liberty,” which sets us free to act. Christians are set free in Christ to act to fulfill God's purposes in the world (see James 2:12; Galatians 5:13–26).

1:26–27. James concluded chapter 1 by clearly outlining the content of God's purposes in the world. For James, the essence of true religion lies not in what we say but in what we do. Here again James resonated with the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Among other prophetic exhortations, James here sounds like the prophet Micah, who articulated the requirement of God to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Even more powerfully, James echoed the words of Jesus in Luke 4:18–21, where the prophetic words of Isaiah inaugurated Jesus' mission. True Christians follow the pattern set by Jesus, who acts to fulfill God's purposes in the world.

Focusing on the Meaning

“Christian Living 101” sounds like the basic course in Christian discipleship. While James's instructions for Christian living are simple enough to articulate, the practice of “Christian Living 101” is actually quite challenging. In an era where there are innumerable instruction books on how to live the Christian life, James makes it excruciatingly simple: *What you have heard, do! What you believe, be!* We find words easy to say but hard to accomplish. For James, genuine Christians don't just show up once or twice a week to hear the word of God; rather they hear and do the word of God in specific and world-changing ways. Genuine faith calls for action in all the details of life, most especially in the care for “least

of these” (Matt. 25:40)—for James, the orphan and the widow, for us the marginalized and disenfranchised.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Before class, write the phrase “Trials I have faced . . .” on a marker board or poster. As people arrive, instruct them to write on the poster their responses to the statement. (If you think people in your class might be reluctant to do this, you could ask them to think of such things and write them on a card.)
2. Before class begins, enlist one person to portray James and one person to interview James. Dress James in a robe, sandals, and a beard (or provide a sign, “James,” for the person to wear). Direct James to the section “Introducing the Book of James: Real Faith in Action” in the *Study Guide* for answers to the following questions from the interviewer.

Interview Questions:

- For the audience please state your full name.
- No last name, just like Cher or Beyonce?
- James, you come from a very prestigious family; list your family members for us.
- In his Gospel, Mark mentions your connection to Jesus, what was the situation (Mark 6:3)?
- In the beginning did you believe your step-brother was the Messiah? Why not?
- What finally convinced you Jesus was God’s Son?
- In your letter you introduce yourself as a servant of God and Jesus. Why did you not indicate your relation to Jesus?
- What role did you hold in the church that helped you promote Christianity?

- Your letter is written to the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” Who were these tribes, and why did you send them the letter?
- James, our time is up but I want to thank you for enlightening us about your book, “James.”

(A copy of the interview questions is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

Guide Bible Study

3. Select one person to use a putter and putt a golf ball into a cup two feet away. Point out that if a golfer practices only this drill his or her golf game will not improve. Next, move the cup to the opposite side of the room and place an obstacle between the ball and the cup. Challenge the person to putt the ball into the cup again. Ask how making the challenge more difficult could actually benefit the golfer.

Read James 1:2–4 and discuss how trials can actually enhance life. Point out that the verse says, “Whenever you face trials” not “*if* you face trials.” Call attention to the responses to “Trials I have faced . . .” to remind them that everyone faces trials. Tell how you handled an experience that tested your faith. Suggest how it affected the way you live out your faith.

4. Form the members into groups. Assign one of the following Scripture passages to each group: James 1:5–8; 1:9–11; 1:12–18; 1:19–21; 1:22–27. Give each group index cards to make flash cards based on their Scriptures. Instruct each group to do the following: (1) read the Scripture together; (2) use information in the *Study Guide* on the assigned verses to discuss and understand them; (3) write an issue on one side and the solution on the other side based on this passage. Give each group time to share the flash card. Ask each group to attach the flash cards to the wall, with the issue side visible.

(A copy of the group instructions is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)

5. Make a sign entitled “Trial” and another sign entitled “Temptation.” Attach each sign to opposite walls. Instruct members to write words or phrases associated with each word on separate pieces of paper (or Post-It® notes) and attach them on the wall under the appropriate sign. Read the different descriptions. Select one person to read James 1:2, 13–15. Point out that the word for *trial* and the word for *temptation* come from the same root word. Lead a class discussion on the differences between a trial and a temptation using information in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*.

Encourage Application

6. Use a GPS or a map to show the class detailed instructions on how to get from one specific location to another. Put the map away and instruct members to write down the instructions by memory. Show the map again to check their accuracy. Ask what made the exercise difficult. Read James 1:22–24. Call for volunteers to share Scriptures that helped them navigate through a time they needed direction in their lives. Discuss reasons people will hear God’s word but choose not to do what it says.
7. Read James 1:26–27. Lead members to design a definition for true religion based on these verses. Write it on the board.
8. Refer to the issues on the cards from step 4; the card “Trial” from step 5; and the definition of true religion from step 7. Lead the group in a time of meditation on how well they are following the instructions from James 1 about these matters.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Tell this story: Scott recently finished the fire academy and was assigned to be a paramedic. On Scott’s first day, his station was called to a large fire at a house. As they approached the house, the

fire chief called for a paramedic to administer CPR to a woman lying on the lawn. Scott knew CPR, he was confident in the procedure, and he had made a perfect score on his test. In the heat of the moment, though, Scott was scared and pretended he did not hear the fire chief. He passed by the victim, leaving her for the other paramedic. Ask, *What benefit was Scott's knowledge to the victim?* Then ask, *What good is knowledge or confidence without action?*

2. Explain that today's lesson begins a study in the Book of James. The Book of James calls for faith in action. James is famous for asking, *What good is it if a person claims to have faith in God but has no actions to back it up?*

Guide Bible Study

3. Display this outline from the *Study Guide*:

Christian Living 101 (James 1)

1. From Skeptic to Believer (1:1)
2. Hang in There (1:2–4)
3. When You Don't Have a Clue (1:5–8)
4. Don't Bet on Your Possessions (1:9–11)
5. Don't Take the Bait (1:12–18)
6. The Prescription Won't Help Unless You Take the Medicine (1:19–27)

4. Refer to outline point 1. Read James 1:1. Give a brief lecture on the identity of James using the information from "Introducing the Book of James" in the *Study Guide* and "Bible Comments" in this *Teaching Guide*.
5. Refer to outline point 2. Using *TRIAL* as an acrostic, call for words that define a trial. Write these words on the board by the appropriate letters. Enlist someone to read James 1:2–4. Ask the class to name some trials Christians face. Write these on the board. Ask

how being a Christian specifically helps with each trial. Refer to the word “endurance” in 1:3, and invite comments about what the word means. Ask how trials increase endurance.

6. Refer to outline point 3. Invite a volunteer to read James 1:5–8. Ask the following questions, allowing time for responses to each: *Why is it hard to ask for godly wisdom? What is our responsibility after God grants us wisdom? What is wrong with being double-minded?* Explain these verses as seems helpful by using information on them in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*.
7. Refer to outline point 4. Have someone read James 1:9–11. Explain the verses as needed using information in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*.
8. Refer to outline point 5. Enlist someone to read James 1:12–18. Explain these verses using information in the *Study Guide* and “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*.
9. Read James 1:19–21. Ask, *What makes you angry?* Then ask what instructions the Bible gives about anger. Write responses on the board. Lead a discussion on why James connected listening, speaking, and anger with removing moral filth and evil.
10. Refer to the illustration at the beginning of lesson 1 in the *Study Guide*. Read James 1:22–27. Explain how looking in a mirror helps us to see the truth. In a mirror we can see every wrinkle, every scar, and every beauty mark. Ask the class what they would do if the mirror revealed a strange spot or mole on their face. Ask how the Bible is like a mirror. Ask, *What should we do when the Bible reveals a problem in ourselves to us?*

Encourage Application

11. Lead the class to review the life subjects James mentioned in chapter 1. Ask the class to share one instruction James gives for each subject listed. Write the instructions on the board. Challenge each member to identify one life subject with which they struggle and commit to apply James’s instruction this week. Close in prayer.

NOTES

1. Preface to Luther's first edition of the German New Testament (1522), cited in James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 106.
2. Harold S. Songer, "James." *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972). 101–102.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3 and 7–9 are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.