

OUR WALK

Group Leader's Guide

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Kenneth Schenck's book, *Our Walk*, is the basis of this six-week study that focuses on the daily application of faith as presented in the book of James. As James points out, the proof of genuine faith is seen in our works, not our words. The aim of this study is to put action to our profession of faith. If we do this, Christ will be visible in tangible ways.

You and your group members can anticipate lively, helpful discussion as you proceed through this study.

ENDURING TRIALS

James 1:1–18

TO THE FACILITATOR

Get off to a good start by introducing yourself to the group. Cite a few personal biographical facts and tell what your hobbies are. Also, let everyone know you want every group session to be open-ended. Everyone’s questions and comments are welcome and honored. Finally, have everyone state his or her name and something about themselves.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

The apostle James, for whom the book of James is named, was a leader in the first-century church. On page 5 of *Our Walk*, Kenneth Schenck states: “The book of James is a collection of wisdom that we traditionally associate with the James who was the leader of the church of Jerusalem. Paul called him ‘the Lord’s brother’ in Galatians 1:19, so he was likely the James mentioned in Matthew 13:55. Jesus’ mother and brothers did not fully understand Jesus’ mission while he was on earth, but came to believe Jesus was the Messiah after his death and resurrection. James would go on to become the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem.”

James addressed his letter to Jewish believers who were undergoing various trials (James 1:1–2). He encouraged them to rejoice, knowing trials test faith and develop perseverance (v. 3). Patient perseverance leads to spiritual maturity (v. 5). Christians under trial may ask God for wisdom. We may not understand the purpose of the trials or how to endure, but God promises he will give the wisdom generously without scolding us (v. 5).

We must ask in faith, otherwise we are double-minded—unsure whether we want to depend on the Lord for wisdom to endure the trials or to abandon our trust in him (vv. 6–8).

Likely, James was challenging the rich in verses 9–11 to recognize that God can use trials to humble them. Prosperity can end abruptly, and the rich man can lose everything.

God is not the author of sin. He does not solicit anyone to sin. He allows trials in our lives to make us better not bitter, and holy not unholy. If we persevere under trials, he will award us “the crown of life” (v. 12). No one can blame temptation on God. Desiring what God has put off-limits

is the source of sin (v. 13). The Serpent used Eve's own desire for what God had put off-limits to draw her into sin. Illicit lust leads to sin, and sin produces death (vv. 14–15).

Two facts are unchanging: (1) God does not tempt his people, and (2) he gives them only good things. He is not fickle, giving good things one day and bad the next. He is always dependable (vv. 16–17). He gave us the privilege of being born into his family so we might honor him (v. 18).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that God sends trials to punish us?
2. Is sickness always a sign of sin in a person's life? Why or why not?
3. Why doesn't God end every kind of trouble in a believer's life?
4. How has a trial helped you become a stronger believer?
5. What was particularly hard to cope with in a recent trial? Why did that element seem so hard to bear?
6. If a terminally-ill Christian asked you for prayer, what beneficial thought might you include in your prayer?
7. Why do you agree or disagree that each past trial has made you better prepared for the next?
8. What practical lessons have you learned from the Lord's example of victorious suffering?
9. Based on James 1:4, why do you agree or disagree that no one can be holy without enduring trials?
10. How is it possible to respond to trials with "pure joy" (James 1:2)?

WRAP-UP

Conclude this session by having volunteers share any difficult trials, and then have the group pray for those who shared.

DOERS OF THE WORD

James 1:19–2:13

TO THE FACILITATOR

How much good does it do if a patient simply reads his or her doctor’s instructions without following them? Little or none! God’s Word supplies the instructions we need for a robust faith and holy walk, but we must obey those instructions. This session emphasizes the need to be doers of the Word.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

How should we accept trials? Not with an angry spirit. We should accept them with a teachable spirit. God has placed his Word in us to teach us his will. He wants us to get rid of all moral filth and evil and welcome the Word (James 1:19–21).

Like a mirror, the Word offers a clear picture of our character. Merely listening to the Word does nothing to improve our character (vv. 22–24). We must act positively to what the Word reveals (vv. 25–26).

Religion is worthless if it does not control the tongue (v. 26). Religion that is acceptable to God helps the needy (v. 27). On page 31 of *Our Walk*, Kenneth Schenck writes, “What does it mean to be authentically religious? It’s not about saying religious things (1:26). A much more accurate indicator of true religiousness is helping those most in need, individuals such as orphans and widows. In James’ world, there were no social services to take care of these most vulnerable groups. If there was no additional family, such children might be lost to the streets, and such widows abandoned to starvation.”

In James 2, the apostle denounced favoritism in worship. It is wrong to favor the rich over the poor. We must treat everyone with the same love regardless how well dressed they are (vv. 1–3). James reminded his readers that the rich were exploiting them and slandering the Lord’s name (vv. 4–7).

The command to love one’s neighbor as oneself is the royal law (v. 8). If we fail to love as we should, we are guilty of breaking God’s law just as surely as if we had broken every command in the law (vv. 10–11). On page 38 of *Our Walk*, the author challenges, “The application is straightforward.

Whom do we ignore? Whom do we forget is sitting at the table because we are too focused on someone else? Whom do we not see? Do we give our best to one of our children and give the leftovers to the others? Whom do we not invite when we plan things? We do not have to be ministering every moment of every day, but we are all God's ministers every moment of every day."

Instead of discriminating against the less fortunate, we ought to show them mercy, remembering that God will judge us as we judge others (vv. 12–13).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. What have trials taught you?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that Christianity is a religion?
3. How might a person include more poor and needy people in his or her circle of friends?
4. Why do you think Jesus' ministry appealed so well to the poor and needy?
5. In your opinion, which class of people is harder to reach for Christ, the poor and needy or the upper class? Defend your answer.
6. What forms of discrimination have you observed in your church? How did that discrimination affect the church?
7. What issue arose in the early church? How did the Twelve resolve the issue (see Acts 6:1–7)?
8. Why is the command to love your neighbor as yourself appropriately called "the royal law"?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that favoritism is as offensive as murder?
10. How did mercy triumph over justice at the cross?
11. Why do you agree or disagree that social welfare programs make it unnecessary for churches to have programs for caring for the needy.

WRAP-UP

Challenge each group member to show mercy this week to someone he or she considers worthy of judgment.

FAITH AND WORKS

James 2:14–26

TO THE FACILITATOR

Often nothing expresses faith as well as a kind deed. This week’s session emphasizes the difference between empty faith and a working faith.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

James teaches that faith is not just about what we believe, but also about how we behave. Actions, not just words, reveal the genuineness of our faith. If a person claims to have faith but does not extend help to the needy, his or her faith is not saving faith (James 2:14).

In James’ world, poverty was commonplace. Many people needed food and clothing but lacked the means to obtain both. James said it was worthless to tell a needy person to stay warm and well fed without helping in a tangible way (vv. 15–16). That kind of faith, James wrote, is dead (v. 17).

Deeds are the proof of real faith (v. 18). Even the demons believe in one God, but their faith doesn’t save them (v. 19).

On pages 47–48 of *Our Walk*, Kenneth Schenck comments, “In Greek the noun for ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ is *pistis*. Meanwhile, the verb for ‘believe’ or ‘to have faith’ is *pisteuo*. So when the demons ‘believe’ in 2:19, they have faith of a sort. But it is just a ‘head faith.’ It is not a ‘heart faith.’ They have a faith that is dead, like the person who believes the right things but whose actions do not show it.”

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God indicted his ancient people for their lack of genuine faith. They went through all motions of religion but their deeds were corrupt. God said, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isa. 29:13).

Faith and works complemented each other in Abraham’s life. God counted him righteous when he obeyed God’s command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (James 2:20–23). Although God’s promise of an heir depended upon Isaac remaining alive, Abraham trusted that God would fulfill his promise despite the contradictory circumstances. So he acted. He did what God told him to do!

His faith was completed by his works, demonstrating that faith alone does not make a person righteous (v. 24).

Perhaps the difference between faith that doesn't work and faith that does work is a matter of intellectual faith as opposed to faith that involves the heart. Ascribing to a set of teachings may be intellectual faith, whereas trusting in the one who is the focus of those beliefs is heartfelt faith. The former may rely on religious works for justification, but the latter produces good works as proof of justification (see Rom. 4:4–5; Eph. 2:8–10).

Another example of genuine faith is that of Rahab. She showed her confidence in God by hiding the Hebrew spies, and God considered her righteous (James 2: 25).

Faith without works is as lifeless as a dead body (v. 26). Kenneth Schenck comments on page 56–57 of *Our Walk*, “We probably should not even call something faith if it is just a head belief. True faith, living faith, involves a confidence in God that changes the way we live. True faith, living faith, results in faithfulness to God.”

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How would you describe the actions of real faith?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that it is possible to believe a biblically sound statement of faith without having saving faith?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that only God can distinguish real faith from dead faith?
4. What actions might be strong indicators of genuine faith?
5. How might faith do more than simply say, “I will be praying for you”?
6. What pious expressions may be associated with a dead faith?
7. How might a person whose faith is dead do more harm than good?
8. Why do you agree or disagree that a person who is said to have lost his or her faith might have had only a dead faith?
9. Where was Abraham's faith when he offered up Isaac? Defend your answer.
10. Why did God consider Rahab righteous? How might a pagan relative or neighbor become righteous?

WRAP-UP

Challenge each group member to show real faith this week by helping someone in need and by obeying God from the heart.

TAMING THE TONGUE

James 3:1–18

TO THE FACILITATOR

Since this session concerns the tongue, a few good words are in order as you begin the session. Praise the group members for the faithful attendance and participation. Tell the group they will have their tongues examined in this session.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

James issued a warning to those who presume to be teachers. Teachers will be judged more strictly than their students (James 3:1). A teacher ought to study carefully to be certain he or she is teaching the truth, because it is easy to stumble and say the wrong thing. If a teacher is never at fault, he or she is “perfect” or mature (v. 3).

Although it is a small member of the body, the tongue can do damage unless it is controlled. James used the illustration of a horse’s bit to emphasize his point. A rider is able to use a bit to turn the animal in the desired direction (v. 3). Also a small rudder attached to even a large ship can control the ship’s direction even in windy conditions (v. 4).

Just as a small spark can launch a raging forest fire (v. 5), so an out-of-control tongue can be an agent of hell, setting the whole course of a person’s life on fire (v. 6). Kenneth Schenck comments on page 65 of *Our Walk*, “When Matthew 16:18 says that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, it is talking about the gates of death. But the hell mentioned in James 3:6 is the place prepared for the Devil. Like an arrow lit by a Roman soldier before shooting, the tongue can be lit on fire by Gehenna and in turn set our lives on fire with evil.”

Human beings have tamed a wide variety of animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures, but no one can tame the tongue (v. 7). It is restless and full of poison (v. 8). It is totally inconsistent to use the tongue to praise God and also use it say bad things about our fellow human beings (vv. 9–10).

Real wisdom is not about being smart. It is about being loving. This wisdom comes from above and works itself in a humble, good life (v. 13). It does not harbor envy and selfish ambition. Envy and selfish ambition produce disorder and evil actions (vv. 14–16).

True wisdom is sourced in heaven, and is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, fruitful, impartial, and sincere (v. 17). Those who possess heavenly wisdom reconcile those who are at swords-points (v. 18).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree with Kenneth Schenck's statement that "a person can go the whole way with God and still fail at some details" (*Our Walk*, p. 62)?
2. How can a person best prepare him- or herself to teach a Sunday school class?
3. How does a horse's bit or a ship's rudder relate to the importance of taming the tongue?
4. How can a gossiping person damage an individual Christian or even an entire congregation?
5. What do you think has contributed to the rise of profanity among Christians?
6. How might gossip become a reason to exercise church discipline?
7. How did your "vocabulary" change when you became a believer?
8. Read Ephesians 4:29–31. What kinds of uses of the tongue grieve the Holy Spirit?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that a Spirit-filled believer does not use his or her tongue to do such things as curse, gossip, slander, and tell off-color jokes?
10. How might a person's untamed tongue show that he or she is a hypocrite?

WRAP-UP

Give each group member an index card and pencil, and instruct them to list their frequent misuses of the tongue. The members should take their index cards home and cross out each misuse of the tongue as the Holy Spirit tames their tongues this week.

GOD'S FRIENDS

James 4:1—5:6

TO THE FACILITATOR

Henry Ford is noted as having said, “My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me.” Pass along this quote to the group and explain the session is about being God’s friends.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

James wrote about two kinds of friendship. One, the worst kind of friendship, is friendship with the world. The second is the best kind of friendship. It is friendship with God.

Friendship with the world occurs when believers assume the same kinds of evil desires and actions as are prevalent in the world system that opposes God. This friendship causes evil, selfish desires to erupt in church bickering and selfish prayer (James 4:1–3). Quarrelsome, selfish believers should not expect God to answer their prayer, because they simply want to spend what they get on their own pleasures.

There is no middle ground. Either we hold hands with the world or choose to love and serve God. Friendship with world is hatred toward God (v. 4). If we friends with the world, we are adulterers. We have forsaken our love and loyalty for God, and have fallen in love with the world. Consequently, God’s Spirit in us becomes intensely jealous (v. 5). He wants us to love God exclusively.

However, God gives us the grace we need to end our friendship with the world and renew our friendship with God (v. 6). This restoration begins when we submit to God and resist the Devil. The Devil stirs up the kinds of selfish desires that lead to quarrels and judging. God has promised to come near to those who approach him for cleansing (v. 8). Contrition and genuine repentance are part of the prescription for regaining friendship with God (vv. 9–10).

James called his readers to stop slandering one another. It is not our responsibility to judge one another. Often the person who slanders does so for the enjoyment derived from hurting others or covering personal sins. Only God has the right to judge (vv. 11–12).

We must understand, though, that God expects us to judge between truth and error and right and wrong. A church must judge those who violate God’s laws, but we must not take to ourselves God’s

prerogative to judge. On page 85 of *Our Walk*, Kenneth Schenck wisely states, “Matthew 7:1–2 says, ‘Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.’ Obviously this instruction does not mean we cannot draw conclusions about right and wrong behavior. Adultery is a sin and it is not judging to say so. However, in other cases we do not know a person’s intentions. Even more to the point, it is not our job to make sure a wrongdoer experiences the consequences of his or her wrongdoing.”

James gave a warning and some much needed advice for the wealthy who failed to consider God’s will when they made financial plans (v. 13). No one knows what the next day will bring (v. 14). Life itself is fragile and death may occur at any moment. The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16–20 illustrates this truth. His plans were unfulfilled because in an unexpected moment God called his soul away from earth. So his wealth and his big plans for the future amounted to nothing. Instead of drawing up our future plans without seeking God’s will, we ought to find and follow God’s plans (James 4:15).

Boasting about what we will do or obtain is evil (v. 16). It is also sinful to know what the Lord wants us to do and yet refuse to do it (v. 17).

The wealthy oppressors received a stern warning from James (5:1). God would take away all their wealth and possessions (vv. 2–3). They had cheated their laborers in order to increase their profits, but God had heard the workers’ cries (v. 4). The rich oppressors had lived in luxury and self-indulgence, but judgment was fast approaching (v. 5). The oppressors had put innocent people to death, although those people had done nothing to oppose them (v. 6).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How have selfish motives inflicted harm on a church you know?
2. What might be an example of selfish prayer?
3. How do you distinguish between friendship with the world and friendship with people of the world?
4. Why is the indwelling Spirit jealous?
5. What does it mean to be humble?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that humility is rare among Christians?
7. What biblical or current evidence supports the statement that God opposes the proud?
8. How can a believer resist the Devil?
9. How would you answer someone who says, “Who am I to judge?”
10. How does James 5:1–6 apply to an employer who treats his employees unfairly?

WRAP-UP

Suggest that group members apologize to anyone they have maligned, and also determine to say something nice to others this week.

THE LORD IS COMING

James 5:7–20

TO THE FACILITATOR

What should we do while wait for the Lord’s return? This session addresses this question. Inform the group that we should not set a date for the Lord’s return or be idle in the interim.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

Farmers know what it means to be patient for the land to produce crops (James 5:7). Similarly, the church needs to wait patiently for Christ to return (vv. 7–8). Waiting a long time for something may lead a person to become grumpy and irritable, but Christians should not display such attitudes as they wait for the Lord (v. 9). The Lord, the Judge, will deal with such attitudes (v. 9).

James’ audience suffered severely for their faith, and naturally hoped for the Lord’s return to put an end to their suffering. James counseled them to follow the example of the prophets who remained firm in the faith in spite of the suffering they endured (v. 10). He also held up the example of Job, who was targeted by Satan. Although Job suffered enormous trials, he persevered, and triumphed over Satan. In the end, the Lord blessed Job and gave him far more than the trials had taken from him (v. 11; Job 42:12–17). James assured his readers that the Lord is “full of compassion and mercy” (James 5:11).

Next, James addressed the issue of taking oaths (v. 12). On page 99 of *Our Walk*, Kenneth Schenck comments:

It is not obvious, from our point of view, how this instruction fits into the context, although it may have been obvious at the time. Perhaps those under persecution were sometimes pressured to take oaths of various kinds. But as we have seen repeatedly, James passed on tradition we have heard on the lips of Jesus in Matthew. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount not to swear at all (Matt. 5:33–37). We are to be people of truth who do not need to swear. You probably know such people. They are so honest that you believe anything they tell you without question. We are all to be such people.

In spite of its suffering, the early church could pray and sing praises to God (James 5:13). A Christian afflicted with illness could call upon the elders of the church to pray over him or her and anoint him or her with oil in the name of the Lord (v. 14). The elder's prayer, offered in faith, would make the sick person well and bring forgiveness if he or she had sinned (v. 15).

Prayer is powerful because it unleashes God's power (v. 16). Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and not a drop fell on earth for three and a half years (v. 17). Again he prayed, and God opened the windows of heaven to send down rain so crops would spring up (v. 18).

James concluded his letter with another practical exhortation. If a brother or sister wanders from the truth, we should try to restore him or her (v. 19). Such restoration saves him or her from death, and it also covers a multitude of sins (v. 20).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that the Lord is coming soon?
2. What world conditions or moral conditions make you eagerly hope for the Lord's return?
3. If someone asked you what this world is coming to, how would you answer?
4. Do you find it hard to wait patiently for the Lord's return? If so, why?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that it is wrong to take an oath in court?
6. How have you witnessed the power and effectiveness of a righteous person's prayer?
7. What signals a person's wandering from the truth?
8. How would restoring a wanderer from the truth save him or her from death?

WRAP-UP

Thank everyone for participating in the study of *Our Walk*. Ask volunteers to share the most valuable lesson they have learned from this study and tell how they will apply it to their lives.