

ANDREW T. LE PEAU  
AND PHYLLIS J. LE PEAU

*A Deeper Look at*  
**JAMES**

NINE SESSIONS FOR GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

FAITH THAT WORKS



*LifeGuide*®  
IN DEPTH  
BIBLE STUDIES



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# INTRODUCTION

## *Faith That Works*

*Y*he New Testament letter of James is one of the most appreciated and most troubling books of the New Testament. People love its down-to-earth practicality. There's no erudite theology or philosophy here. No sir! James's focus is on living the Christian life. His Proverbs-like conciseness is clear and direct. In fact, James is very pointed at times in his criticisms of the rich, the argumentative and those who are teachers.

On the other hand, readers find James frustrating and confusing. He does not seem to line up with Paul's teaching on salvation by faith. In fact, when he says faith without works is dead, he seems to be saying the opposite of Paul.

One of the other curious characteristics about the letter of James is that very little is said about Jesus. In fact, Jesus is only mentioned by name twice in the letter—in 1:1 ("the Lord Jesus Christ") and 2:1 ("our glorious Lord Jesus Christ"). "The Lord" is mentioned thirteen other times in the letter, but each of these (with the exception of 5:7-8) could be general references to God or God the Father rather than to Jesus.

Since every other book of the New Testament mentions Jesus dozens and dozens of times, this difference in James's letter is rather conspicuous. It is also curious because tradition has it that the James who wrote the letter was in fact the half-brother of Jesus. (There are four people named James in the New Testament. Two were apostles [see Matthew 10:2-4]. Another was the father of the apostle Judas [not Iscariot; see Luke 6:16]. And then there is the brother of Jesus who, though he did not accept Jesus' authority before the resurrection,

became the head of the church in Jerusalem [see Matthew 13:55 and Acts 12:17; 15:13].) Some speculate that James deliberately downplays his blood relationship to the Savior so as not to fall victim to the arrogance of speech he condemns in his letter.

In any case, while explicit reference to Jesus is minimal in the letter, the influence of Jesus is profound and pervasive. As we will see in the course of this book, Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Sermon on the Mount in particular strongly affected James and his letter. We don't know if James had a copy of the Gospel of Matthew as he wrote, but certainly he knew the oral tradition of the Sermon on the Mount that had been passed down through the church in the decades between Jesus' death and the writing of the various New Testament books. The chart "Comparing James and Sermon on the Mount" on the next page offers a sampling of what we will see.

James shows how he has integrated the teaching of Jesus into his own life, thought and instruction to the church in Jerusalem where he was the leader (Acts 12:17; 15:12-23; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). His leadership in the church ultimately resulted in his death by stoning in A.D. 62. This was part of the ongoing persecution of the infant church that had begun in Acts 7-8 with the stoning of Stephen, probably no later than A.D. 40. That the letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1) indicates not only that this letter was likely intended to circulate among the various Christian communities in the Mediterranean basin, but also that these early Christians were no strangers to persecution and its results.

### Comparing James and Sermon on the Mount

LETTER OF JAMES	SERMON ON THE MOUNT
<b>James 1:2, 12</b> Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. . . . Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.	<b>Matthew 5:11-12</b> “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
<b>James 1:5-6</b> If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.	<b>Matthew 7:7-8</b> “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”
<b>James 1:10</b> But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower.	<b>Matthew 6:30</b> “If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?”
<b>James 1:13</b> When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.	<b>Matthew 6:13</b> “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”
<b>James 1:19</b> Everyone should be . . . slow to speak.	<b>Matthew 5:34-37</b> “But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool. . . . All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”
<b>James 1:19</b> Everyone should be . . . slow to become angry.	<b>Matthew 5:21-22</b> “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”
<b>James 1:22</b> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.	<b>Matthew 7:21, 24</b> “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”  “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”
<b>James 2:4</b> Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?	<b>Matthew 7:1-2</b> “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.”



**Comparing James and Sermon on the Mount (Continued)**

LETTER OF JAMES	SERMON ON THE MOUNT
<p><b>James 2:5</b> Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:3, 5</b> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”</p>
<p><b>James 2:10-11</b> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:17-19 (see also 5:21-22, 27-28)</b> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”</p>
<p><b>James 2:13</b> Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:7 and 6:14-15</b> “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”  “If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”</p>
<p><b>James 3:12</b> My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 7:17-18</b> “Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”</p>
<p><b>James 3:17</b> But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:5</b> “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”</p>
<p><b>James 3:18</b> Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:9</b> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”</p>
<p><b>James 4:2-3</b> You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 7:7-8</b> “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”</p>

Comparing James and Sermon on the Mount (Continued)

LETTER OF JAMES	SERMON ON THE MOUNT
<p><b>James 4:9-10</b></p> <p>Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:4</b></p> <p>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”</p>
<p><b>James 4:11-12</b></p> <p>Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?</p>	<p><b>Matthew 7:1-2</b></p> <p>“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.”</p>
<p><b>James 4:14</b></p> <p>Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 6:30</b></p> <p>“If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?”</p>
<p><b>James 4:15</b></p> <p>Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”</p>	<p><b>Matthew 6:10</b></p> <p>“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”</p>
<p><b>James 5:2</b></p> <p>Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 6:19-21</b></p> <p>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”</p>
<p><b>James 5:10</b></p> <p>Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:11-12</b></p> <p>“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”</p>
<p><b>James 5:12</b></p> <p>Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:34-37</b></p> <p>“But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool. . . . All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”</p>

How then can we summarize the letter of James? There are, after all, a number of handy ways people have summarized the Gospels. For example, it is said that Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, that Mark presents Jesus as Suffering Servant, that Luke presents Jesus as the Son of Man and that in John Jesus is the Christ, the “Son of God.” If that is the case, then James presents Jesus as Teacher and Lord.

Jesus’ influence is also seen in James’s teaching style. While parables were not unique to Jesus in the ancient world, they certainly were prominent in his teaching. Likewise, James uses mini-parables to drive home his points. Though they are not as elaborate or perhaps as inventive as those of Jesus, they serve the purpose quite well. James uses other colorful metaphors and figures of speech to make his prose memorable and effective, as seen in the chart “Mini-Parables in James.”

Commentators have offered many outlines for the book of James. It has been a notoriously difficult book to pin down because James some-

times seems to proceed from point to point without clear connections. Despite the diversity among commentators about the structure of James, a synthesis or consensus of several outlines in simple form might look like this:

- 1. Introduction (1:1)
- 2. Opening Themes (1:2-27)
- 3. Partiality and Faith (2:1-26)
- 4. Words, Wisdom and Wealth (3:1–5:11)
- 5. Closing Exhortations (5:12-20)

This guide is based on the divisions of the *James* LifeGuide Bible Study. Since James is so dense, it is sometimes helpful to break up thought units so they can be digested more easily in one session—whether for individual study or in group discussion.

We could say more about the themes of James. But that is what the rest of this book is intended to guide you into. So, let’s move ahead and see what this practical and challenging letter has to say to us.

Mini-Parables in James

James 1:10-11	The Wild Flower Scorched by the Sun
James 1:23-25	The Man Who Looks in a Mirror and Forgets What He Looks Like
James 2:2-4	The Rich Man and the Poor Man Come to Church
James 2:15-16	The Good Wishes That Don’t Help Someone in Need
James 3:3	The Horse Guided by a Bit
James 3:4	The Large Ship Guided by a Small Rudder
James 3:5	The Forest Set Ablaze by a Small Fire
James 3:10-12	Springs That Only Produce Fresh or Salt Water
James 3:12	Fig Trees Don’t Bear Olives
James 3:12	Grapevines Don’t Produce Figs
James 4:13-15	The Merchant Who Thinks He Can Plan for Tomorrow

## HOW TO USE LIFEGUIDE® IN DEPTH

The Bible is God's Word to his people. In it and through it we find life and wisdom for life. Most importantly, the Scriptures point us to Christ, who is the culmination of God's revelation to us of who he is. The LifeGuide in Depth Bible Study series has been created for those who want to go deeply into the Bible and deeply into Christ.

Going deeply will require time and effort. But the reward will be well worth it. If your desire is a richer understanding of God's Word, if you want to grasp Scripture at a level and in dimensions you've not engaged in before, these in-depth studies are for you.

This series emphasizes

- taking passages seriously as a whole
- seeing how each passage connects to and is built on the rest of Scripture
- applying the truth of each passage to individuals and to our Christian communities

How do we do this? Each session follows a four-part format:

- **Part 1. Investigate**—Getting an overview of the passage as a whole.
- **Part 2. Connect: Scripture to Scripture**—Seeing how the passage or theme connects to other parts of the Bible.
- **Part 3. Reflect**—Pondering a key theme in the passage through a short reading.
- **Part 4. Discuss: Putting It All Together**—Tying together as a group the various themes from the first three parts and learning to apply the passage to real life.

Though groups and individuals may use LifeGuide in Depth studies in different ways and formats, the most straightforward way to use the guides is for individuals to study the first three sections on their own before each group meeting. Those first three sections are best done over several days rather than in one sitting, as individuals will typically need a

total of three to four hours to work through them. Part four then offers a forty-five- to sixty-minute group discussion that guides members in putting together everything they've learned.

LifeGuide in Depth Bible Studies can be used by people of various ages, from teenagers to seniors and everyone in between. Groups can be church-related home small groups and Sunday-school classes, women's and men's Bible studies, neighborhood Bible studies, and university campus small groups. And the guides can be used on a weekly or biweekly basis, or could even form the core of a retreat weekend.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR PARTS

**Part 1. Investigate (On Your Own).** Inductive Bible study is at the core of LifeGuide in Depth studies. Allowing for in-depth study of one passage, an inductive approach to Scripture has three main parts: we first carefully observe what is in the text, then interpret what we are to learn from what we observe and finally apply the meaning of the passage to our own lives. This is accomplished through the use of open-ended questions that help people discover the Bible for themselves. The goal is to come to the passage with fresh eyes, not supposing we know all that it means ahead of time, but looking to see what God might have to teach us anew.

Inductive study is not meant to be mechanical; Scripture is not data that we manipulate toward a certain output. Nor does it imply that we can master Scripture. Rather we expect the Word to master us. But believing that God uses our understanding to touch our hearts and that he uses our hearts to touch our understanding, inductive study can help us draw near to God. It's a tool to guide our hearts and minds toward Christ through his Word. For more on inductive study we recommend *Transforming Bible Study* by Bob Grahmann and *The Bible Study Handbook* by Lindsay Olesberg.

Part one of each session is a revised edition of the original LifeGuide Bible study guide. LifeGuide Bible studies have been the leading series for individuals and groups studying Scripture for almost thirty years. They have given millions of people a solid grasp of the Bible. The LifeGuide in Depth Bible Study series, like the original LifeGuides, honors the context of each book of the Bible and the original message of each biblical author, and guides readers into application of God's Word. Relevant excerpts from *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* and *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* have been added to these studies to offer helpful historical and cultural information about each passage. These excerpts appear as callouts in part one of each guide.

**Part 2. Connect: Scripture to Scripture (On Your Own).** One of the most important ways of understanding any particular passage of Scripture is to uncover how it stands in the pathway of the rest of Scripture. The historical, cultural and literary background of any passage is critical, and how biblical writers draw on previous Scripture offers a wealth of meaning to readers. The purpose of part two of each session is to draw this out.

The original writers and readers of the books of the Bible were thoroughly immersed in the Scripture written beforehand. It was the air they breathed. So when they wrote, earlier Scripture passages and themes were an inseparable part of how they thought and taught. Thus, understanding the New Testament often requires knowing the Old Testament allusions, themes or direct quotations found there. And usually it is not enough to know the one particular Old Testament verse being quoted or referenced. We need to understand the context of that verse in the chapter and book in which it is found. Neglecting this can lead readers astray in their interpretations or applications.

For example, in Mark 6:47-50, Jesus walks on the lake during a storm and is "about to pass

by [the disciples]" (v. 48), who are struggling for survival in a boat. Does Jesus not see them? Doesn't he care they are in danger? Why does he intend to "pass by"? What's going on? The answer is found by going back to the Old Testament. In Exodus 33:19-34:7 and 1 Kings 19:10-11, God "passes by" Moses and Elijah to reveal himself in a clear and dramatic way. Mark uses the same phrase (which his readers would recognize) to indicate that Jesus is making a similar dramatic revelation of divine character.

In making these connections, it is usually more helpful to go backward than to go forward. That is, we should first investigate Scripture written before the passage being studied was written. For instance, in seeking to understand the Psalms, we should first go to the earlier books of the Old Testament rather than to the New Testament. The psalmists knew and perhaps had memorized large portions of Genesis, Exodus and so forth. That was the raw material they were working with; those were their sources. If we don't understand how and why they built on these, we won't understand fully what they are saying.

Take the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 52-53. Although New Testament writers linked Jesus to the suffering servant, we shouldn't "read back" into Isaiah the notion that the servant was a divine figure. The text in Isaiah does not indicate that and we would be misreading the text to insist that it does. Nonetheless, it is entirely appropriate to use this image, as Jesus did, to gain a greater understanding of another dimension of who Jesus was and what he came to do.

In part two, then, we will mostly, but not exclusively, go back to Scripture that predates the passage we are studying for better understanding.

**Part 3. Reflect (On Your Own).** In part three you will find a reading that expands on one of the themes of the study. It may contain a story or commentary on the passage, or both. And it may be drawn from some other Christian au-

thor or source, whether contemporary or ancient. In any case, it is intended to help focus your mind in a single direction after the wide variety of issues raised in parts one and two. A couple of questions at the end of the reading will help you crystallize what you have learned.

**Part 4. Discuss: Putting It All Together (With a Group).** This part is, as the name describes, intended for group discussion. You can work through it on your own too, but some questions are repetitive with questions from the first three parts. This is intentional and necessary for group discussion; after individuals in a group have worked through each passage on their own during the week, they will want to hear from each other what they have learned and thought about. If you decide you do want to go through part four by yourself anyway, you can skip those questions that were found earlier or use those questions as opportunities to think again about key ideas. Reviewing the content is a good way for groups *and* individuals to lock those ideas into their hearts and minds.

Groups should begin the discussion with the “Open” question and then read the passage together. Everyone will have been over the passage several times already, but reading aloud in a group can actually bring new insight.

Below are a few suggestions for group members that can facilitate rich discussion and insight:

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, she or he will be asking the questions found in this guide and encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned.
3. Stick to the topic being discussed. These

studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. This allows everyone to participate on equal ground and fosters in-depth study.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Also note that each question assumes a variety of answers; many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to do so also.
6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways to take action individually and/or as a group.
7. It will be helpful for groups to follow a few basic guidelines. These guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, should be read at the beginning of the first session.
  - Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.
  - We will provide time for each person present to talk if he or she feels comfortable doing so.



- We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.
- We will listen attentively to each other.
- We will be very cautious about giving advice.

Additional suggestions for the group leader can be found at the back of the guide.

Plunging into the depths of God's wisdom and love is a glorious adventure. Like Paul

said in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10: "As it is written: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived'—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God." As you go in depth into Scripture, may the Spirit reveal the deep things of God's own self to you.





## SESSION ONE

# DEPENDABLE OR DOUBLE-MINDED?

*James 1:1-18*

### WHERE WE'RE GOING\*

Sometimes people have the mistaken impression that just because they follow God and do what he says, everything in life should turn out great. No more problems, difficulties or disappointments. That's what those who first read James's letter two thousand years ago thought too. Why does life often seem so hard even after we commit ourselves to Jesus? That's where James begins his letter, so that's where we'll begin too. We'll dig deeply into the first part of James 1 in four sections.

**Part 1. Investigate: James 1:1-18 (On Your Own)**

**Part 2. Connect: Scripture to Scripture (On Your Own)**

**Part 3. Reflect: The Process of Character (On Your Own)**

**Part 4. Discuss: Putting It All Together (With a Group)**

### A PRAYER TO PRAY

Here's a prayer you can use to set you on your way:

*Father, Son and Spirit, gracious triune God of love, we know that every good and perfect gift comes to us from you. You shine light in darkness, and remain steady and constant in a world that is always changing. You generously provide all we need when we face difficult times. So we ask you to open our eyes to see your Word of truth as we begin our study of James. Give us the wisdom we need so that we will remain steadfast when trials come and so that our very lives might become a gift we give back to you in gratitude. Amen.*

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\*Though these studies can be used in a variety of ways and formats, for maximum benefit we recommend doing parts one, two and three on your own and then working through the questions in part four with a group.