

Why Study the Book of James?

James is unique amongst the books of the New Testament. It contains the most practical kind of theology and teaching; it focuses on how the Christian life should be lived, what *difference* our faith in Christ should make, those attitudes and behaviours which should make a Christian man or woman stand out from the crowd. And the author doesn't pull any punches: "Faith by itself," says James, "if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17). It is about the kind of faith that rolls up its sleeves and gets its hands dirty, it is about No-Nonsense faith.

In fact, James talks so much about the necessity of backing up our profession of faith with concrete action that the book has even been accused of calling into question the teaching of the New Testament that salvation is by grace alone! Martin Luther famously referred to James as "a right

strawy epistle", as he found its strong emphasis on reformed behaviour hard to stomach. Of course, James does not deny that salvation is by grace alone. What he does do, however, is remind us that any real faith, any true relationship with a holy God, will *always* result in a changed and changing life. "I will show you my faith", he says. How? "By what I do." (James 2:18) Any other kind of faith is not really faith at all.

Any study of the book of James will bring a challenge. If you can read those five short chapters without feeling anything of the conviction of the Holy Spirit then you are either fooling yourself or you have already reached glory! As we study this epistle over the coming weeks, let's do so with an openness to the Lord and a willingness to be challenged and changed by Him in whatever ways He desires.

The Format of the Studies

I have stuck with a format very similar to that of the last series. Can I encourage you once again to involve as many people in your group as you can in leading a section of one of the studies. Think about the different individuals in your group. Is there

someone who, with your encouragement and practical help, might be able to try leading one of the Bible studies or worship times, who has never done anything of the sort before? Why not take a chance on someone?

Meditations

The book of James lends itself well to private study and reflection as well as group study. As an experiment, I have included a number of short meditations on each study sheet. The intention of these is that each person in the group will be able to reflect on some of the key verses of the passage and how they apply to their own lives before coming to the group meeting. Obviously, if your group decide

together that you want to use these, the sheets will have to be distributed ahead of time. My hope is that these meditations might both allow God to speak to each of us individually but also that they might lead to more fruitful group discussions. It's an experiment, please let me know whether it works or not.