

# *From Consumers to Community*

## **Introduction**

'Faith without deeds is dead' writes James in his letter to the early church (*James 2:26*).

This Autumn, we are going to be exploring what this means for us as individuals, as a church and for our community. We'll be looking at it as part of a journey through the whole of James' letter.

We live in a culture heavily shaped by consumerism –we expect to be able to pick and choose what we want to have and do. It's easy to get swept along by the culture of 'What's in it for me?' But all too often we can get so concerned about our what we see as our individual needs, that community suffers –people become increasingly lonely and isolated –often through their own choices. Sometimes this only becomes obvious when something goes wrong.

With this strong current in society, it's hard to resist the same pressures within the church ('polluted by the world' as James puts it). We can all easily slip into treating our faith as something to 'meet our needs' rather than as a gift from God to be shared with others. Faith can become an extra 'add on' to our lives, rather than the starting point that shapes everything we do. Worship can become 'what's in it for me' rather than an offering of our whole beings to the living God.

James' letter gives us lots of straight-talking practical advice to help us paddle against the flow – to live as effective Christians in today's culture. His picture of the church is as a community living in a distinctive way –putting their faith into action in the way they live. It's a community that is not closed –but is active in the world –changing the wider community which they are part of, by showing love for all.

So, over the next few months, as we recognise the cultural pressures upon us, let's apply James' practical and challenging advice. Let's put faith into action – reshaping the way we relate to God, to one another and to our neighbours, such that we become less like consumers and increasingly like a community acting together to bring God's transforming love into our neighbourhood.

## **The Book of James**

We're told in this letter that it was written by 'James', but it's not absolutely clear which one! We do know that this is not James, brother of John, who was one of Jesus' three closest friends –he was killed earlier (Acts 12:2). We can't be sure, but most likely this is James, a brother of Jesus (or at least half-brother –because Jesus' dad was God!) –see Galatians 1:19, Acts 15:13 etc.

## **Format of the Series**

On Sundays, in our services, preaching, KFG etc, we'll be going through the letter chapter by chapter from start to finish. However, there are certain clear repeated themes in James. In our Growth Groups, we'll be following these themes in each session –picking out the verses from the book relating to the theme. We will still cover the whole book, just in a different way, which should give a slightly different perspective on the letter and help in applying it to our lives.

At the same time, for each session there are a couple of practical exercises which follow through the series, designed to encourage us to be more sensitive to listening and responding to God.

*Toby May*

*This material has been written drawing on a range of resources including several commentaries (Motyer, Davids, Tasker, Beasley-Murray) & Study Guides ( LePeau, Lucado). For extra personal regular study, I'd recommend 'Life Lessons with Max Lucado –the book of James'*

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## 1: Introducing James

This week is an introduction to the whole book to give an overview before getting stuck into the themes next time. It would be helpful to let people read through the introduction to the notes first.

### **WELCOME & WORSHIP**

*Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...*

Each share one good thing and one 'not so good' thing that's happened since you last met.

Spend a few moments praying for one another in 3s-4s –giving thanks for the good things & asking for God's help with the 'not so good' things.

### **WORD**

**EVERY WEEK DURING THIS SERIES, Please try this...**

**After** worship and before reading the Bible passage, spend 3 minutes in silence (or sometimes you could use quiet instrumental music) .

Encourage each person to ask God to speak to them. Each listen for anything you think he's saying or any pictures he's giving you –either now or from the past fortnight. If other distractions come to mind, then ask God if he wants to say anything about them –or set them to one side.

**Now** share together anything that you feel God has been saying to you. & you are comfortable sharing. Some will be from God and some won't –we're human & make mistakes and this is where others can help us. It's helpful to write things down and look for patterns in discerning what God could be saying to the group or individuals.

Generally God speaks to a person directly, so most things we hear from God are for us as individuals. Sometimes he speaks to us about our group, church or community, but first we should always apply them to ourselves.

## Growth Group Notes Sept-Dec 2010



**THIS WEEK:** You may like to discuss how you feel about this exercise. You may also like to share stories of when you've felt God speak/nudge you!

### Read James Chapters 1-5

Reading the whole letter will take about 10 minutes, but will give an overview of how people would have originally heard it.

*It's probably easiest going round the group reading a section at a time*

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- What is your first reaction to the letter?
- How does the letter overall sound to you? What do you feel is the tone and atmosphere? How do you feel about this?
- What particular themes do you see in the letter?
- Is there anything in the letter which you find particularly interesting or challenging? Is there any particular bit you're looking forward to thinking about further?

### **WHAT NEXT?**

With Alpha starting soon, why not write down the names of people you'd like to come. Then pray for them and pray for yourselves –that God would give you opportunities to invite them.

Share any personal prayer requests and pray for one another.

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## 2: Faith and Actions

### WELCOME

*Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...*

Play a few rounds of Charades or similar game that involves actions without words.

### WORSHIP

*Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.*

### WORD

**DO** The Weekly Exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see last week's notes). This time, you could first each take a pen and paper. Read Psalm 37:1-9 together to one another. During or after listening, each draw something that comes to mind.

**Read James 1:22-25, 2:14-26, 4:13-17**

**Discuss** your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- James 2:26 likens faith without deeds to being like looking in the mirror (1:23) or a body without spirit (2:26). Jesus used parables to make similar points. Imagine you were doing a school assembly on faith without deeds. In 2s-3s, try coming up with an



alternative illustration to show that faith without deeds is dead. Share your ideas with the whole group.

- Some people would suggest that we need to learn lots about God before acting on our faith. What do you think James would say to that argument?
- Many people locally would say they are Christians because they believe in God. How would you respond to someone like this if they started talking about it? (note James 2:19)
- Some say that James' emphasis on the importance of actions in faith contradicts Paul's emphasis on being saved by grace through faith and not by works. Is James saying that doing good deeds alone is enough? How would you explain how James' teaching fits together with Paul's in Ephesians 2:4-10?
- How do you think we should plan (or not plan) our lives according to James' advice in 4:13-16?

People often define sin as 'doing something bad'. In 4:17, James defines it as 'not doing good'.

- Can you give examples of the difference between the two?
- What difference would it make to your life if you understood sin in the way James describes in 4:17 and lived accordingly?

## **WHAT NEXT?**

Discuss how your group could put your faith into action together more. Think of people known to you you'd like to pray for. What could you do practically to put your prayers into action?

Alpha: Pray for the helpers, guests and practicalities

**NEXT TIME:** Ask everyone (if they're willing) to bring to the group a resource that they've found particularly helpful in living as a Christian. It maybe daily study notes or a book or a website etc.

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## 3: Everyone Welcome!

### **WELCOME**

**SEE Last Time!** Share the resource that you've brought that you've found helpful in living as a Christian. If you haven't brought one –then tell about something you've found helpful.

### **WORSHIP**

*Please use the exercise under 'Word' but you may like to use another form of worship beforehand to help people to draw near to God.*

### **WORD**

**DO The Weekly Exercise of listening to God for 3 minutes (see last week's notes).** This time, you could ask God to bring to mind a particular person that he wants you to pray for and then ask him to help you pray.

**Read James 1:9-11, 2:1-13, 4:11-12, 5:1-6, 5:19-20**

**Discuss** your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- If James wrote to us today from one of the world's poorest countries, what do you think he would say?
- Looking at James 5:1-6: In what ways can we each put our faith into action regarding issues of world poverty?

## **Growth Group Notes**

### **Sept-Dec 2010**



- In what ways might we over-value wealth in our own lives or in others?
- If someone with no church background came to our church one Sunday, how do you think they would feel? What could you do to make them feel more welcome?
- How can we become more welcoming to everyone in our community as a church?
- What would you say to a friend who said 'I'm a good person. I generally do what's right. That's enough isn't it?' –see James 2:10
- James encourages us to correct sin (5:20), but also to welcome everyone and not to judge (4:12). Give examples of when it might be difficult to follow all this teaching. How should we act in practice?

## **WHAT NEXT?**

Why not find out about one of the mission or relief organisations that Christ Church supports, then choose one to pray for as a group on a regular basis.

Pray for us as a church –that we would be increasingly welcoming to our local community.