

Your heart's greatest commitment

James 4 v 13 – 5 v 20 – Leaders version

For a one hour study, just do the starred * questions

Check in – with the group sitting in a semi-circle go round and ask everyone, including leaders, how they are and how they're feeling about studying the Bible today.

What does the passage say and mean?

90 minutes

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What do you think your heart's greatest commitment is?

What would other people say your heart's greatest commitment is?

*1. Read James 4 v 13-16. What is the overall message of these verses?

You are not in control of your future; God is. 'As Christians, we know where we will be in a million years. That is in God's hands and he's told us about it. But we don't know what will happen tomorrow. That is in God's hands, but he hasn't told us about it.' (Allberry 2015, p120)

*2. Instead of planning great schemes for the future, what should we say?

If it is the Lord's will... (This isn't a mantra or a lucky charm - it's not saying the words that matters, it's believing them!)

*3. Do you think God has a problem with our plans to save for the future, business, family, next year's holiday, a wedding, etc.?

No, because if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. The point is that we need to recognise God's sovereignty over our lives. The problem is with thinking that we are in control of our future – thinking that things will happen because we say they will happen. We do need to plan ahead, but in doing this, our

plans should be in line with God's will (His will is that we are obedient, it's not just about a calling to Africa) and we must remember that we are like a mist that vanishes and we may not see our plans come to completion.

4. Read James 4 v 16-17. How do you think v17 is linked to v13-16?

If you carry on with your own plans, ignoring God's call on you, you are disobeying God, which is sin. If your schedule is built on your desires, not God's, e.g. 'I'm too busy to go to church,' or 'work is more important than spending time with my kids' you are not doing the good you know you ought to do because you're busy doing something else.

5. Read James 5 v 1-6. Here James is talking to (unbelieving) people who are causing believers to suffer, and he writes as if judgment has already happened. What wrong does he say these people had done?

They had hoarded wealth and not paid their workers, while living in luxury and self-indulgence.

NB These rich people had a responsibility towards the poor, since the poor were their employees – this isn't directly comparable to giving everything away to the homeless or to charity. Christians can be rich, if they can handle the money responsibly.

The rich of 5 v 1-6 are likely to be unbelievers since they are not called 'brothers and sisters', a phrase which James otherwise uses liberally, and they are not called to repentance. These people were unlikely to actually read the letter, but James writes this for the believers to see how God feels about the people who are badly treating his people (Allberry 2015, p126).

*6. What is the difference between hoarding wealth and saving for the future?

A flip-chart comparison might help.

Hoarding	Saving
<i>At the expense of other people (v3, the rich hoarded money and didn't pay their workers' wages)</i>	<i>Tends to be flexible according to needs of others</i>
<i>Love of money / financial security</i>	<i>Realistic view of money and the security it can and cannot give</i>
<i>No goal – just keep adding to the pot</i>	<i>Specific goals for specific needs</i>
<i>You don't intend to spend it, you just want to have it</i>	<i>You intend to spend it when the need arises</i>
<i>The money controls you</i>	<i>You control the money</i>

The main difference is the attitude to the money. Ultimately, when you die or Jesus comes back, you're going to lose it all anyway!

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Are you a hoarder or a saver? Is your attitude to money challenged by what we have discussed so far?

You don't need to have money to be able to answer the question!

7. **SHOUT-OUT** Who do you think James is talking about in v6?

He's talking about people who die as a result of other people's wealth. See how many you can list from today's world e.g. factory workers, miners, sweat-shops, unfair trade agreements etc.

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Can you think of any ways in which you could change your shopping habits to help people who are living in poverty?

Buying fair-trade, finding out where clothes are made and how well paid the workers are, donating money to relief charities e.g. Tearfund, Oxfam etc.

You might like to print out info from <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/en/buying-fairtrade/bananas> to help your group to see what conditions people are in in other countries, and how we can help in our shopping habits.

Questions 8-10 are **SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS**. You need to write them on flip-chart sheets for the group to work on in pairs.

8. **SDL** Read James 5 v 7-11. James is talking to the believers again now. What situation are they in that means they need to be told to be patient?

They are oppressed by the rich of v1-6. They are suffering poverty, injustice and opposition to their faith.

*9. **SDL** What are they to patiently wait for and how will this change things?

For 'the Lord's coming' – for Jesus to come back. When Jesus comes back, they will be with Christ for eternity, there will be no sin or suffering (Rev 21 v 4) and there will be justice.

*10. **SDL** In v11, James says that those who persevere in the face of suffering for Christ are blessed. Why is it a blessing to suffer for Christ?

Christ's Name is glorified in us (before heaven and earth) as we suffer for him.

Suffering is an important part of growing in faith. 1 Thess 1 v 3-4 says that suffering for Christ increases our faith and our love for each other. We also grow in maturity of faith through suffering.

11. James gives the example of a prophet called Job who learnt patience and perseverance through suffering. Has suffering taught you patience and perseverance?

*12. Read James 5 v 12. Why do you think we are told not to swear 'by heaven or by earth or by anything else?'

As a follower of Christ, our word is enough – if we cannot be trusted to keep our word, we are not following Christ. If we feel we need to swear by something ('on my mother's grave' etc.), we are saying that our simple yes or no is not trustworthy. To swear by something is to give it power (which it does not and cannot have) to hold us to our promise.

NB, if it comes up in discussion, Allberry says that 'James is not ruling out Christians speaking under oath in a courtroom, but ruling out ever needing to outside of one.' (p145). However, there is a version of the oath in Court which does not 'swear by Almighty God' with your hand on the Bible, available on request.

'Witness Oath

"I swear by (according to religious belief) that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

Witness Affirmation

"I do solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/giving-evidence-court> (sourced 17/10/16)

*13. Read James 5 v 13-18. What is James's point in v17-18?

He's talking about the power of prayer to change situations. (Refers to 1 Kings 17 v 1 and 18 v 1, 41-46).

14. How does this help us understand verses 13-16?

James is telling us to pray (talk to God) whatever situation we're in. There's nothing we can't pray about – trouble, happiness, sickness, sin etc.

15. Read James 5 v 15. How do you understand this verse?

We know from experience that people who are sick do not always get better when they are prayed for. How we interpret this observation in the light of Scriptures such as James 5 v14-15 can have a significant effect on our understanding of, and trust in, God.

The Gk verb sosei means 'to save' which can refer to salvation or healing. If the sickness is the Lord's discipline on the sinner, then when we pray in repentance, we may or may not be healed but we will be forgiven. In context, James is talking about being forgiven when we pray in repentance.

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16. Read James 5 v 19-20. What are we to remember as we finish reading James' letter to the scattered and suffering believers?

- *As believers, we are brothers and sisters in Christ*
- *People do wander from the truth (backslide)*
- *They can be brought back to faith (in repentance)*
- *Sin leads to death*
- *Leading a sinner to Christ changes their eternity – a chance to review the gospel as you finish the series of studies in James.*

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As we've thought today about our attitude to money and about suffering for the sake of Jesus, we have been considering what our hearts are most committed to. Be honest, what is your heart most committed to and has studying the letter from James changed that?

Check out – with the group sitting in a semi-circle go round and ask everyone, including leaders, how they found the study and if they are safe to go back to the cell.

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