

Goal: To engage the advice of James about living a Christian life that involves loving God and others.

Connecting with the Biblical Text

This letter is addressed “to the twelve tribes who are scattered outside the land of Israel” (Jas. 1:1, CEB). Clearly this letter is meant for Jewish Christians. The reference to *scattered* could refer to those who were forced to leave Israel as far back as the Babylonian exile in 587 BCE. Even though Jesus is never mentioned in this story of moral conduct, the writer leans heavily on the Jewish understanding that living a moral life is as important as keeping the festivals and holy days of the faith. James encourages them to be strong in the face of difficulties because they live in the midst of a foreign culture that worships many gods. The best known message from James is “be doers of the word and not only hearers” (1:22, CEB). Yet in the texts for this session, three other teachings are prominent:

- ✦ Be ready to listen and be slow to express anger.
- ✦ Be slow to speak, lest you show your lack of wisdom.
- ✦ Don't let your eyes deceive you, for everyone is worthy in God's sight.

To dig deeper into James and its moral teachings, go to bit.ly/GLJames1Commentary.

Connecting with the World

- ✦ The moral code found in James is one that transcends the centuries and is found in many faiths. How do you see it played out in your community? Where is it missing?
- ✦ Many businesses, professions, and workplaces have a code of ethics particular to them. What is the code of the ethics where you work or spend time? How was it developed? How does the message from James fit with it? How can this moral code from James be applied in other settings, such as in your community?

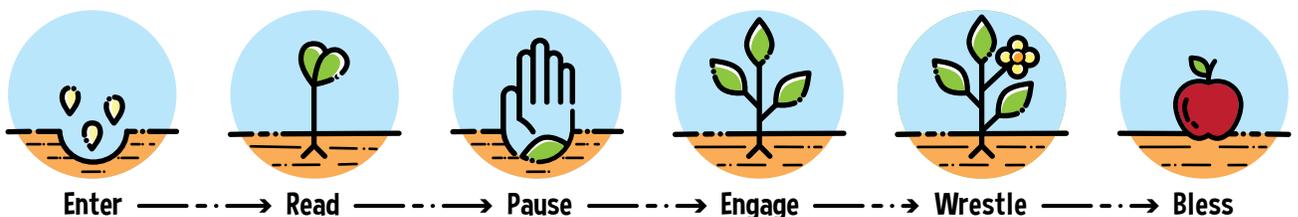
Caring God, keep these words from James before us so that we might use them each day. Amen.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Children who are trying to figure out how to live with others in a variety of settings, from home to school to sports teams, will find these words from James helpful. Hearing words from the Bible that support the words of parents, leaders, teachers, or coaches will make the message more important. They can look for examples of these teachings around them and consider how these teachings can help them. Look through the books your children read, especially their favorites. How do those stories support what you want them to know about living with others, about following Jesus, about showing hospitality? For example, if each child in an elementary school class were to listen to or read a chapter of *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams (Doubleday, 1991) each school night, what questions might this classic children's story raise that would fit with the moral teachings in James? If you are not familiar with this story, watch the YouTube video “The Velveteen Rabbit: Told by Meryl Streep (Official Rabbit Ears Video)” (bit.ly/GLVelveteenRabbit, 6:09).

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

- ✦ Read Proverbs 15:1, a saying about speech that brings forth anger. Meditate on it and James 1:19–21. Think about how these Scripture passages connect.
- ✦ We live in a diverse nation. The numbers and types of faith communities is probably more numerous in your community than when you were a child. How has community life changed to adapt to these differences? How has that changed the way you practice your faith? What from James could help you to evaluate what you say and do?



Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✓ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✓ Stationery paper of various types
- ✓ Envelopes
- ✓ Newsprint
- ✓ Handheld mirror
- ✓ A few fancy dress-up clothes and a few ragged dress-up clothes
- ✓ *A Church for All* by Gayle E. Pitman (Albert Whitman & Co., 2018) or internet-connected device
- ✓ Highlighter marker
- ✓ *Glory to God* hymnals (or other hymnals) or internet-connected device
- ✓ Light-colored construction paper
- ✓ Smooth river stones
- ✓ Paint pens

Preparing to Lead

Begin by exhaling deeply. As you exhale, release any worries or distractions you are carrying with you. Take three deep, slow breaths. As you breathe, focus on your exhale. Imagine God's love washing over you. Pray, "Loving God, open my heart to hear your Word, and help me to lead with compassion. Amen."

Read James 1:19–27; 2:1–7 and make note of any questions this passage raises for you. Then read "A Loving Heart Helps Others" in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 314). Thinking about your life, the children you will lead, and your role as a leader, reflect on the following questions:

- ✓ What is your relationship with anger? How is it helpful, and how is it destructive?
- ✓ Where do you fall on the continuum of "hearers" and "doers"?
- ✓ How is the advice from James helpful in your relationships? In your faith community?
- ✓ When have you been judgmental, showing partiality? How might you do better next time?

This session begins a unit on the advice that early disciples gave new believers for living the Christian life. The contents of these letters written to the church is significant, and their format of communicating this advice is significant as well. Letter writing may be a lost art, particularly for young people. Contemplate your group and which

of the four pieces of advice that James gives are most important for learning in your context.

Before the session, gather various types of stationery with envelopes for the children to use, and place it on a table.



Enter into sacred space together.

Greet the children as they arrive and invite them to sit at the table where stationery paper is available. Encourage them to write or draw a letter to an important person in their life. It could be their parents, a close friend, a teacher, or a coach. Tell them they will not need to share this letter with anyone. Provide some envelopes so that they can fold their letter and place it in the envelope for safekeeping during the rest of the session. Have them write the name of the recipient on the front of the envelope and their name on the back. When everyone has arrived, lead them in a blessing of the letters using the following prayer:

Lord, we ask your blessings on the words and pictures we share with others. May they show our love for you and help the ones we write to know you better and to share your love with others. Amen.

Place letters aside until the closing of the session.



Read a story of God's people.

Tell the children that the story they will hear today is more of a letter than a story. Explain that in the past, letters were the primary way people communicated over distance, because there were no phones, computers, or televisions at the time the Bible was written. Set the scene for today's reading by telling the children that the letter writer is identified as James, who wrote only one letter that is in our Bible. Comment that letters during this time might be addressed to one person or to one church of new believers, but the idea was that they were to be shared with other people and other churches. Tell the children that the writers of the letters in the Bible were often giving advice to the followers of Jesus, and that advice is still important for believers today.

Leading

Show the children the illustration that accompanies the story from *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 314) and invite them to think about what this picture illustrates as they hear the story. Read aloud “A Loving Heart Helps Others.”



Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Invite the children into a time of quiet reflection. Tell them that you will watch the clock for one minute as they quietly think about this story. Invite the children to think about the advice that James gave.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Engage the children in conversation about the letter James wrote using the following questions:

- What were the four main pieces of advice that James wrote about to the followers of Jesus?
- What do you think is the most important one to follow? Why? (*Assure the children that answers may differ, but encourage them to consider why they think the advice they chose is important.*)
- Think about the picture that illustrates the story. Why do you think James encouraged people to look in a mirror?
- What do you think your church or family might look like if they followed this advice consistently?

You may want to keep a running list during this unit of all the advice from the letter writers about living as Christians. You can write these four things from James on newsprint and save the list for the next session.

Choose one or more options:

- Dealing with Anger
 - Comment that everyone gets angry, but we can choose how to respond in ways that do not hurt ourselves or others. Invite the children to discuss different healthy ways to handle anger with others. Possible strategies might be doing some physical activity like taking a walk or playing a game, listening to or playing music, making something, drawing their feelings, or spending time with pets.

- Mirror, Mirror

- Wonder together what it means to have your words and actions match. Brainstorm some ideas when words and actions don't match. Some examples might be when someone says that they are always kind but then talks about someone behind their back, or when a person says that they have learned about loving their neighbors in church but then wants to play with their friends instead of helping a neighbor carry their groceries.
- Pass a handheld mirror around the group, inviting each person holding it to tell a story of a time when their words and actions matched. Have the group respond with, “You are a doer of the word and not merely a hearer” after each participant has spoken, including leaders.

- Welcoming All

- Role-play the third thing to remember about welcoming others with three people: one as the well-dressed person, one as the poorly dressed person, and one as a church greeter/usher. First do the role play welcoming the well-dressed person but ignoring the poorly dressed person or asking them to leave. Then replay the role play with the opposite intention of welcoming the poorly dressed person and ignoring the well-dressed one. Finally, replay the scene where both are welcomed and invited to sit next to each other. Debrief with your actors and the larger group after each version of the role play.
 - How did you feel?
 - What would you have done differently?
 - How do you think Jesus would handle this situation?

- A Church for All

- Invite the children to see all the different people present in the church described as you read aloud *A Church for All* by Gayle E. Pitman or show the YouTube video “A Church for All” (bit.ly/GLAChurchForAll, 2:37). After the story, ask them how they would get to know the different people pictured and who they would be most excited to meet.
 - Sing together “God Welcomes All” (*Glory to God* hymnal, #399) or invite children to sing along with the YouTube video “God Welcomes All” (bit.ly/GLGodWelcomesAllQuartet, 0:38).



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Choose one or both options:

- “James Says” Game
 - ✦ Provide children with paper and pencils, inviting them to make a list of different pieces of advice that they hear from the adults in their lives, whether these be parents, teachers, coaches, or other important adults. Have them work on their own and assist with writing as needed. When they have finished their advice lists, collect the papers. Quickly scan them and use a highlighter to mark the pieces of advice that seem like ones James might give, leaving the ones that are clearly different from James’s advice unmarked.
 - ✦ Invite the children to play a game called “James Says.” Explain that you will read from the advice the children have provided, saying “James Says” before each piece of advice on your list, highlighted and unmarked both, mixing up the order in which they are given. Tell the children that if they think the advice given would be in agreement with what James says, they should stand or raise their hand. If the advice given would not be like James’s advice, then they should remain seated and not raise their hand. Begin with all the children seated, and if they stand or raise their hand, they should return to being seated and having hands down before the next advice is given. Occasionally, after a piece of advice, ask the children why that advice would be like James or not.

- James’s Message for Today
 - ✦ James used the media of his time to communicate his advice to others. Invite the children to think about all the different options he would have today. Have them make a case for what would be most effective way to reach the greatest number of people today. If opinions differ, form small groups for two or more of the suggestions. Have the children choose a message from James and describe how it would be shared through their form of communication. For example, have them consider what a tweet might be or what picture might communicate their message in an Instagram post. If they think a television commercial would best communicate James’s message, have them act it out.



Bless one another with God's grace.

Provide the children with the letters they wrote at the beginning of the session. Wonder if anyone wants to change the contents of their letters or add anything to them. If so, give them a few minutes to do so. Encourage the children to either hand deliver their letters or to ask their parents to assist them with addressing them for mail delivery. Have the children hold their letters as you pray the following prayer:

Lord, bless these words and drawings from our hearts to those who are important to us. May the words we write and the images we share inspire those who read these letters to love you and all they encounter more fully. And may we try our best to follow James’s advice as well. Amen.



Grow with more.

- Remembering Good Advice
 - ✦ Provide light-colored construction paper and coloring supplies. Invite the children to choose one piece of advice from James that they want to be inspired by or that they want to remember. Write suggestions on a sheet of newsprint. Some ideas might be: “Pause and listen before you speak,” “Be a doer more than just a hearer,” “Treat others fairly,” “Welcome everyone,” “Love all people,” and “Be a friend.” Assist with writing as needed. Encourage them to decorate their poster, take it home, and display it in a place where they will see it often.

- Sharing James’s Advice with Others
 - ✦ As a way to spread James’s good advice to others so that they may be inspired by it, invite the children to paint rocks to leave around your church, neighborhood, or community. See “Remembering Good Advice” above for some ideas, if needed. Write suggestions on a sheet of newsprint. Provide smooth river stones and paint pens. Assist with writing as needed. After the paint has dried, encourage the children to take the stones and place them where others might see them and be inspired.