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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



Universal Letters

**JAMES, 1 AND 2 PETER,
1, 2, AND 3 JOHN,
JUDE**

WILLIAM A. ANDERSON, DMIN, PHD



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Introduction to *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It's a complex book, and many a person of goodwill has tried to read the Bible and ended up putting it down in utter confusion. It helps to have a companion, and *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one. Over the course of this series, you'll learn about biblical messages, themes, personalities, and events and understand how the books of the Bible rose out of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries, people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" Millions of Catholics look to the Bible for encouragement in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that was given Scripture to share and treasure. When used as a source of prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

Your choice of a Bible-study program should be dictated by what you want to get out of it. One goal of *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give readers greater familiarity with the Bible's structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that's not enough. This program will also teach you to use Scripture in your prayer. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as ever, but we get only part of the message when it's memorized and stuck in our heads. It's meant for the entire person—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

We're baptized into life with Christ, and we're called to live more fully with Christ today as we practice the values of justice, peace, forgiveness, and community. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately

by God today. *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* will draw you closer to God, in whose image and likeness we are fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. This series gives you the tools to start a study group. Gathering two or three people in a home or announcing the meeting of a Bible-study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Each lesson in this series contains a section to help groups study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections. Each lesson but the first also has a second section for individual study.

Many people who want to learn more about the Bible don't know where to begin. This series gives them a place to start and helps them continue until they're familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Bible study can be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's Word. When people complete a study of the whole Bible, they can begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into the Word of God.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

BIBLE STUDY isn't just a matter of gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible; it's also about gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich our relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. In his April 12, 2013, address before the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Pope Francis stressed that "the Church's life and mission are founded on the word of God which is the soul of theology and at the same time inspires the whole of Christian life."

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression that means "divine or sacred reading." The process for *lectio divina* consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. Many clergy, religious, and laity use *lectio divina* in their daily spiritual reading to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. Learning about Scripture has as its purpose the living of its message, which demands a period of reflection on Scripture passages.

Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It's not merely an intellectual pursuit; it's also a spiritual one. Page 16 includes an opening prayer for gathering one's thoughts before moving on to the passages in each section. This prayer may be used privately or in a group. For those who use the book

for daily spiritual reading, the prayer for each section may be repeated each day. Some may wish to keep a journal of each day's meditation.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from reading for knowledge or information, and it's more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. It is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus on and become present to the inner meaning of the Scripture passage, the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space, we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our lives and surrender our heart and conscience to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through the reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation, "The Word became flesh," not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

Before you begin, relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). Then practice these four simple actions:

1. Read a passage from Scripture or the daily Mass readings. This is known as *lectio*. (If the Word of God is read aloud, the hearers listen attentively.)
2. Pray the selected passage with attention as you listen for a specific meaning that comes to mind. Once again, the reading is listened to or silently read and reflected or meditated on. This is known as *meditatio*.
3. The exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Does the reading remind you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This prayer-thought will help you remove distractions during the *lectio*. This exercise is called *oratio*.
4. In silence, with your eyes closed, quiet yourself and become conscious of your breathing. Let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you're distracted, use your prayer word to help you return to silence. This is *contemplatio*.

This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

Many teachers of prayer call contemplation the prayer of resting in God, a prelude to losing oneself in the presence of God. Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord. The Word truly takes on flesh, and this time it is manifested in our flesh.



How to Use This Bible-Study Companion

THE BIBLE, along with the commentaries and reflections found in this study, will help participants become familiar with the Scripture texts and lead them to reflect more deeply on the texts' messages. At the end of this study, participants will have a firm grasp of the Universal Letters and realize how these letters offer spiritual nourishment. This study is not only an intellectual adventure, it's also a spiritual one. The reflections lead participants into their own journey with the Scripture readings.

Context

When the authors wrote and edited the Universal Letters, they were dealing with later developments within Christianity that earlier writers of the New Testament did not experience, perceive, or address. To help readers learn about each passage in relation to those around it, each lesson begins with an overview that puts the Scripture passages into context.

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Part 1: Group Study

To give participants a comprehensive study of the Universal Letters, the book is divided into six lessons. Lesson 1 is group study only; Lessons 2 through 6 are divided into Part 1, group study, and Part 2, individual study. For example, Lesson 2 covers James 2:14—5. The study group reads and discusses only James 2:14—4:12 (Part 1). Participants privately read and reflect on chapter 4:13–17 and all of chapter 5 (Part 2).

Group study may or may not include *lectio divina*. With *lectio divina*, the group meets for ninety minutes using the first format on page 14. Without *lectio divina*, the group meets for one hour using the format at the bottom of page 14, and participants are urged to privately read the *lectio divina* section at the end of Part 1. It contains additional reflections on the Scripture passages studied during the group session that will take participants even further into the passages.

Part 2: Individual Study

The passages not covered in Part 1 are divided into shorter components, one to be studied each day. Participants who don't belong to a study group can use the lessons for private sacred reading. They may choose to reflect on one Scripture passage per day, making it possible for a clearer understanding of the Scripture passages used in their *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

A PROCESS FOR SACRED READING

Liguori Publications has designed this study to be user-friendly and manageable. However, group dynamics and leaders vary. We're not trying to keep the Holy Spirit from working in your midst, thus we suggest you decide beforehand which format works best for your group. If you have limited time, you could study the Bible as a group and save prayer and reflection for personal time.

However, if your group wishes to digest and feast on sacred Scripture through both prayer and study, we recommend you spend closer to ninety minutes each week by gathering to study and pray with Scripture. *Lectio*

divina (see page 9) is an ancient contemplative prayer form that moves readers from the head to the heart in meeting the Lord. We strongly suggest using this prayer form whether in individual or group study.

GROUP-STUDY FORMATS

1. Bible Study With *Lectio Divina*

About ninety minutes of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Read Scripture passage aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (30 minutes)
- ✠ Read each Scripture passage aloud a second time, followed by quiet time for meditation and contemplation (5 minutes)
- ✠ Spend some time in prayer with the selected passage. Group participants will slowly read the Scripture passage a third time in silence, listening for the voice of God as they read (10–20 minutes)
- ✠ Shared reflection (10–15 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

To become acquainted with lectio divina, see page 9.

2. Bible Study

About one hour of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Read each Scripture passage aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (40 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

Notes to the Leader

- ✧ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✧ Plan which sections will be covered each week of your Bible study.
- ✧ Read the material in advance of each lesson.
- ✧ Establish written ground rules. (Example: We won't keep you longer than ninety minutes; don't dominate the sharing by arguing or debating.)
- ✧ Meet in an appropriate and welcoming gathering space (church building, meeting room, house).
- ✧ Provide name tags and perhaps use a brief icebreaker for the first meeting; ask participants to introduce themselves.
- ✧ Mark the Scripture passage(s) that will be read during the session.
- ✧ Decide how you would like the Scripture to be read aloud (whether by one or multiple readers).
- ✧ Use a clock or watch.
- ✧ Provide extra Bibles (or copies of the Scripture passages) for participants who don't bring their Bible.
- ✧ Ask participants to read "Introduction: The Universal Letters" (page 17) before the first session.
- ✧ Tell participants which passages to study and urge them to read the passages and commentaries before the meeting.
- ✧ If you opt to use the *lectio divina* format, familiarize yourself with this prayer form ahead of time.

Notes to Participants

- ✧ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✧ Read "Introduction: The Universal Letters" (page 17) before the first lesson.
- ✧ Read the Scripture passages and commentaries before each lesson.
- ✧ Be prepared to share and listen respectfully. (This is not a time to debate beliefs or argue.)

Opening Prayer

Leader: O God, come to my assistance.

Response: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit...

Response: ...as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Christ is the vine and we are the branches. As branches linked to Jesus, the vine, we are called to recognize that the Scriptures are always being fulfilled in our lives. It is the living Word of God living on in us. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your divine wisdom, knowledge, and love.

Response: Open our minds and hearts as we study your great love for us as shown in the Bible.

Reader: (Open your Bible to the assigned Scripture(s) and read in a paced, deliberate manner. Pause for one minute, listening for a word, phrase, or image that you may use in your *lectio divina* practice.)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Response: Our Father...

Leader: Lord, inspire us with your Spirit as we study your Word in the Bible. Be with us this day and every day as we strive to know you and serve you and to love as you love. We believe that through your goodness and love, the Spirit of the Lord is truly upon us. Allow the words of the Bible, your Word, to capture us and inspire us to live as you live and to love as you love.

Response: Amen.

Leader: May the divine assistance remain with us always.

Response: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



INTRODUCTION

The Universal Letters

Read this overview before the first session.

A COUPLE CELEBRATING their fortieth wedding anniversary decided to travel from New York to California, stopping at major hotels on their journey. In several of the hotels, they would turn on their television and find a note on the screen telling them they had a message. When they tuned in to the message, they would read a note that began, “Dear Guests,” which would then welcome them to the hotel and wish them an enjoyable rest during their visit. The couple, knowing the message was a general one received by all the newly arrived guests at the hotel, knew the manager of the hotel did not write that letter specifically for them. It was a common form letter welcoming those who chose to stay at that hotel.

In the early Church, several New Testament authors wrote general letters to those who shared faith in Jesus Christ, instructing or encouraging them in their faith. For instance, when the author of the Gospel of Luke began his Gospel, he addressed it to someone named “Theophilus.” Many commentators believe the name Theophilus was a fictitious name used to designate all those who loved God. The name means “friend of God” or “lover of God.” This was the author’s way of saying that his Gospel was a universal Gospel, meant not only for Jewish converts to Christianity but for all believers, Jews as well as Gentiles. The genealogy in Luke’s Gospel does not trace back to Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation, as found in Matthew’s Gospel,

but it goes back beyond Abraham to Adam and Eve, the biblical first parents of all human creation. It was a Gospel for all believers on their journey in the faith.

The Catholic or Universal Letters

Among the New Testament letters, some are addressed to general audiences, just as the Gospel of Luke was addressed to a general audience under the name of Theophilus. Because the authors of the letters in this volume were addressing a general audience, the letters became known as the Catholic or Universal Letters. In its earliest meaning, the word “catholic” did not refer to a specific denomination among Christian churches, but it was another word for “universal.” The Catholic or Universal Letters embrace seven letters of the New Testament that include a letter attributed to James (mentioned in the New Testament as a brother of Jesus—see Mark 6:3), two letters attributed to Peter, three attributed to John, and one attributed to Jude.

The author of James addresses his letter to the twelve tribes of the dispersion, an apparent reference to Christians spread throughout the known world. The author of 1 Peter addresses his letter to a number of churches in Asia Minor, while the author of 2 Peter addresses his letter to “those who have received a faith of equal value to ours through the righteousness of our God and savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1).

In 1 John, the author does not address his letter to anyone, but he does speak of his readers as “my children” (1 John 2:1). The Second Letter of John is addressed to a “chosen Lady and to her children,” a reference that many commentators believe refers to the Church in general (see 2 John 1:1). Although the author of 3 John addresses his letter to an unknown specific individual named Gaius, the name Gaius was sometimes used in letters for addressing a general group of Christians, just as the author of the Gospel of Luke used the name Theophilus to address his letter to a universal audience. The author of Jude addresses his letter “to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:1).

For a period of time, the early Church hesitated to include these letters in the New Testament due to a widespread question concerning the authenticity of the authors. The hesitation rested on the belief that the apostolic tradition of the Scriptures depended on the authenticity of the author as an immediate follower of Jesus, someone who traveled with him or knew him during his sojourn on earth. In time, the Church realized that the acceptance of a work as coming from the apostolic tradition did not depend on the name of the author as much as it did on the depository of the faith. The leaders of the early Church determined that the works remained faithful to the teachings of the authors whose name they bore. By the end of the fourth and early fifth centuries, the Greek and Latin Churches accepted the letters as part of the revealed Scriptures.

The Johannine Community

Although many commentators believe that the Universal Letters were not written by the authors to whom they were attributed, the people named had a real influence on the development of the letters. For instance, the letters of Peter appear to reflect the thinking of Peter and may have come from followers who belonged to a community faithful to the teachings of Peter the Apostle. The author is addressing situations that did not exist when Peter lived and the basic concepts still remained faithful to Peter's original teachings. The same may be true of the Letter of James. The three letters of John apparently come from a community known to scholars as the Johannine community. This community remained faithful to the teachings of John the Apostle.

In recent years, an extensive amount of study has been done concerning the Johannine school of the New Testament. The term "school" used in this context does not mean that the writers all went to class to learn what John taught, but it refers to a school of thought, a manner of thinking that remained faithful to the original teachings of John and developed according to particular historical and community situations addressed by the author. This school is represented in the three

letters of John as well as in the Gospel of John. Although these letters may have been written by different authors, they share many similar theological concepts.

Understanding the development of the Johannine school enables us to understand the similarities and differences found in the Gospel of John and the Letters of John. Small communities arose within Christianity shortly after the resurrection of Jesus, and it is likely that most were originally under the leadership of those followers of Jesus who were eye-witnesses to Christ's ministry. An understanding of the development of the Johannine school, which was most extensively studied and identified, can offer insights into the development of the letters allegedly written by James and Peter.

The Johannine community developed over several stages, and its history is complex. It began as a Jewish community comprising early followers of Jesus in or around Palestine. Some of John the Baptist's followers also joined this community. Many later converts became part of the Johannine community, including Gentiles from areas outside Palestine who were greatly influenced by the Greek culture.

In the midst of a persecution that took place after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues, evangelists collected the traditions of the Jewish Christian community and interpreted them for the Christian community that was now obviously separated from Judaism.

Other later followers of Jesus' teachings became part of the Johannine community. The Johannine community was not confined to one geographical area as though it was a community of monks living together. Evangelists carried the original Johannine message from one community to another, and these communities applied the basic message to their own historical circumstances.

The final form of John's Gospel and the letters found in the New Testament, which were allegedly written by John, came as a result of many of the ideas and writings of the early Johannine community produced by editors. The characteristics of the theology of the Johannine letters have much in common with those found in the introduction to John's

Gospel, although they are most likely not written by the same author. Just as the developments found in the Johannine community help us understand how the Gospel and the letters can be attributed to John, so a close study of the Universal Letters by Scripture scholars revealed how they followed the basic ideas and teachings of the person whose name they bear.



LESSON 2

Faith Without Works Is Dead

JAMES 2:14—5

If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead (2:15–17).

Opening Prayer (SEE PAGE 16)

Context

Part 1: James 2:14—4:12 The author of the Letter of James tells us that faith without works is dead. If people have particular needs and another person does nothing for them except wish them well, what good is that? A person’s works show whether or not that person is acting with or without faith. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is an example of a work that showed Abraham’s faith. Faith and works exist as one. Abraham demonstrates how both works and faith, not faith alone, are necessary. Rahab, who saved the spies sent into the Promised Land by Joshua, showed by her works that she had faith.

Just as a horse needs someone to control the whole horse by the use of a bridle, and a ship with a rudder needs someone to steer the

whole ship, so the tongue—as small as it is—controls the whole person. Like a fire, the tongue can set the course of one’s life on fire and lead to the fires of Gehenna. We can bless the Lord with our tongue and with the same tongue curse other humans. We should practice wisdom that is from above and avoid all sinful inclinations. Causes of divisions come from love of the world above love of God. Since there is one lawgiver and judge who is the Lord, who are we to judge our neighbor? The present time, not some future time, is the time to change one’s life and live close to the Lord.

Part 2: James 4:13—5 It is time for the rich to lament, since they have lived a life of luxury and pleasure and have fattened themselves for the Day of Judgment. Like the farmer who must wait for the harvest, the followers of the Lord must be patient and firm in their commitment to the Lord. They are to avoid complaining and must persevere as did prophets like Job. They are to make their “yes” mean “yes,” and their “no” mean “no,” being honest enough so they have no need of swearing to the truth.

Those who are sick should summon the presbyters of the Church to pray and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. Their prayer of faith will raise the sick person up and forgive sins. Confession of one’s sins and perseverance and trust in prayer are very powerful for the just person. Elijah’s prayer for the cessation of rain was answered because he believed (see 1 Kings 17:1). The one who brings back a sinner will save his or her soul, and such action will cover a multitude of sins.

PART 1: GROUP STUDY (JAMES 2:14—4:12)

Read aloud James 2:14—4:12.

2:14–26 Faith and Works

In this passage, the author of the Letter of James presents a message that seems to contradict the stance of Paul the Apostle concerning work and faith. In Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul writes that one who does not work, but who believes, is righteous, whereas James begins this passage in his letter saying that it does no good to say one has faith but does not have works. When viewed in the larger context of both passages, it is clear that Paul and the author of James are speaking from a different perspective. Both include Abraham as an example in their presentation, but it is a different aspect of Abraham's faith and works that each presents.

Paul the Apostle views works as works of the Mosaic Law that were central to Judaism. He stresses that Abraham pleased God because of his faith, before the law came into existence as it did later in history, during the time of Moses. Paul was challenging those who believed that righteousness comes to them through the practice of works of the Mosaic Law. He writes, "So also David declares the blessedness of the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works" (Romans 4:6). In other words, David recognizes that the holiness of a person does not result from the practice of the works of the Mosaic Law, but from a person's faith.

Some Christians view James as contradicting Paul when he asks what good is it if one has faith without works. The difference between Paul and the author of James is that the author of James is not speaking about the works of the Mosaic Law or adhering to its commandments, but works in general such as charitable acts or a willingness to act selflessly based on faith in God. Following this view and using the example of Abraham as Paul did, he can state that the Lord justified Abraham because Abraham, through faith, was willing to perform the work of sacrificing his son, Isaac. Abraham believed, and his works proved his faith. For the author of James, it was the work of Abraham based on his faith that made him righteous.

The author expands on his message with examples. If a person encounters a brother or sister who has nothing to wear or eat and merely wishes him or her well without doing anything about it, what good is that? He repeats that faith without works is dead.

The author offers another challenge to those who claim to have faith without works. He asks them to show him faith without works, and he will show them his works as evidence of his faith. Through faith, a person can claim that God is one, but even demons can believe that God is one and tremble at the thought. He calls those people ignorant who do not recognize that Abraham's works proved his faith. It was his faith that led him to action. The author of James claims that this is why the Scriptures were fulfilled in Abraham, who believed in God, showed it by his works, and proved his righteousness.

Providing another image to prove his point, the author draws a lesson from Rahab, the prostitute. When the Israelites were planning to invade the Promised Land, they sent spies to reconnoiter the land, and Rahab helped them escape when they were threatened with capture. In return, they promised to protect Rahab against the Israelites when they invaded the country (see Joshua 2:1–21). The author of James views Rahab's protection of the spies as works that proved faith. The author ends by stating that faith without works is as dead as a body without a spirit.

3:1–12 Bridling the Tongue

The author begins this passage with a warning to aspiring teachers, that is, those who interpreted or shared messages with others. Some people were apparently establishing themselves as teachers, and the author reminds them that only a few are called to be teachers, since teachers, perhaps because of the importance of teaching within the community, can expect to be judged more strictly by the Lord.

The author then addresses the central theme of this section: the control of one's tongue. Aware that all of us make many mistakes in our lives, he states that those who control their speech reach perfection because they are, in fact, controlling their whole body. He uses two examples to demonstrate how something small can control something far larger. A bit in

a horse's mouth controls the horse, and a rudder allows the helmsman to control a large ship, even in the midst of a gale. In the same way, a tongue is only a small member of the body, but it has great control.

Having made his point concerning the power of the tongue, the author turns his attention to the destruction that can be caused by a loose tongue. Just as a small spark or flame can set a whole forest on fire, so a loose tongue, like a tiny spark, can cause vast destruction. The author goes so far as to state that the tongue contains a whole world of iniquity in itself and can contaminate the whole body. The destructive flames of the tongue are with us from birth, and the tongue's flame has its source in hell. Here the author may be referring to the sinfulness that is seen as surrounding our human nature from the time of our birth.

The author continues to reflect on the power of the tongue. He is obviously speaking of the power of speech. While the human being can tame all the animals of the world, no one can tame the tongue. A person cannot be brought into subjection without controlling and disciplining the tongue, since the tongue speaks what the person thinks and wishes to say. The tongue looms as a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the same tongue, we praise God and curse people who are made in the image of God. The author states that this contradiction should not exist, and he uses several images to emphasize his message. A spring doesn't pour out both fresh and salty water; olives do not come from fig trees, and salt water does not yield fresh water.

3:13–18 True Wisdom

In this passage, the author speaks of wisdom, which he understands as wisdom from God rather than the wisdom of this world. This wisdom from God is shown through acts of humility and a good life, while false wisdom leads to jealousy and self-seeking ambition. Such wisdom is a worldly wisdom and does not come from the Lord but from the earth. Those who claim such wisdom boast of nothing. They should not try to conceal the truth. False wisdom lacks spiritual roots and is evil. Where envy and selfish ambition exist, disorder and all kinds of wickedness exist. In contrast, wisdom from above is filled with virtue. True wisdom is

pure, peaceable, gentle, considerate, and merciful, producing good deeds that are impartial and candid. Those who have sown in peace will produce a harvest of peace and righteousness.

4:1–12 Causes of Division

In contrast to peace, the author of James now speaks of the conflicts and battles that originate within the deepest desires of people. He asks where conflicts and wars within the community originate, and he answers that they come from the passions within people. These passions include coveting more than they possess, killing and living with envy without success, yet unable to obtain what they seek. They even fight and wage war. The reason they do not have what they desire is that they have not asked for it, or they have asked improperly, asking selfishly for something that indulges their own passions.

Addressing these people as “adulterers,” the author asks whether they realize that friendship with the world makes them enemies of God. In the Old Testament, those referred to as adulterers were those who broke the covenant with God. Those who follow their passions and desires are the adulterers who abandon God. Like unfaithful spouses, they have given themselves to worldly desires.

The author questions whether the readers believe the Scriptures speak without meaning when they tell us the spirit made to dwell in us leads to jealousy. Since the author does not tell us the source of this Scripture reference and it is not found in known manuscripts, some commentators believe the author of James is quoting this passage from memory. This Scripture reference is difficult to understand. Some translate it differently, as though it is speaking of God’s jealousy for the people of God. God looks into our hearts for a spirit of fidelity. In contrast to those who are God’s enemies, those who are humble receive an abundance of grace from God (see Proverbs 3:34). The author urges his readers to submit themselves to God and to resist the devil who will, as a result, flee from them. As Christians draw nearer to God, God draws nearer to them.

The author urges Christians to wash their hands, a reference to cleansing evil from their lives. He urges those who are double-minded to purify

their hearts, implying that they should seek the Lord instead of the world. Jesus once said a person cannot serve two masters, noting, “He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24).

Christians should discipline themselves, becoming aware of their wretched sins and weeping over them. He contrasts the evil pleasures of the world with the call for Christians to give themselves to God. They should discipline and mortify themselves so that their laughing turns to mourning and their joy turns into dejection. He is not telling Christians to live in the world as sullen, unhappy people, but as people who spiritually reject sinful, worldly pleasures. Christians are to humble themselves before the Lord who, in turn, will exalt them.

The author exhorts his readers not to speak evil of one another, and he compares slander against another or the judgment of another as equivalent to speaking evil against the law or judging the law. In speaking against the law, a person judges the law and is no longer a doer of the law. There is only one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. The author does not name the Lord as the one judge and lawgiver, but it is obvious he is referring to the Lord. To attempt to take the place of the one lawgiver is to act against the law. The author challenges his readers, asking who they are to think they have the right to pass judgment on a neighbor. Since they are not the lawgivers, they do not have the right to judge their neighbor.

Review Questions

1. What does the author mean when he says that faith without works is dead?
2. Why is the author of the Letter of James so concerned about the use of the tongue in speaking?
3. What, according to the author, is true wisdom?
4. How does a lover of the world make himself or herself God’s enemy?
5. What does the author mean when he tells readers to mourn and weep?

Closing Prayer (SEE PAGE 16)

Pray the closing prayer now or after *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina (SEE PAGE 9)

Relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

The meditations that follow are provided only to help group participants use this prayer form, but note that *lectio* is intended to bring one to a place of prayerful contemplation where the Word of God speaks to the hearer from his or her heart. (See page 9 for further instruction.)

Faith and Works (2:14–26)

A pastor spoke to a woman in his parish who claimed she had a difficult time feeling that God really existed and who believed she was losing her faith. The pastor knew the woman was a catechist, teaching in the parish religious-education program, and that she volunteered at the parish food pantry, but she still feared she lacked faith. The pastor asked why she volunteered to do all she did, and her answer was she believed it was important. If there were a God, she believed that this is what God would want her to do.

The pastor explained to her that her works proved she had faith. He added that faith was not a feeling but a dedication to God and proved she believed, even if she did not feel God's presence.

A short time later, the woman told her pastor she suddenly became aware she was trying too hard to believe. She said, "I believe my mother loves me, but she doesn't have to prove it by calling me every hour of the day. Even if I don't feel God's love or my mother's love, I know they love me. I decided to keep on doing what I'm doing for the love of such an elusive God."

Mother Teresa of Calcutta struggled with faith in God, but she never stopped serving the poor. She accepted the most difficult tasks because she believed feelings were not necessary for serving God, but good works

were. The author of the Letter of James states that faith without works is dead, and our good works prove our faith.

✠ *What can we learn from this passage?*

Bridling the Tongue (3:1–12)

A woman told her confessor she gossiped too much and had a problem not talking about the weaknesses of others. The confessor, knowing the weather report called for March winds for the next several days, told her, as an act of satisfaction, to write the word “gossip” on a sheet of paper and tear it into twenty pieces. He directed her to go outside and throw the pieces of paper into the wind. Then she was to go and gather all the pieces of paper from the ground. He knew how difficult this would be and explained the reason for such an act was to show that gossip, once uttered, can rarely be retracted. Like the small pieces of paper, her words of gossip were irretrievably blowing in the wind for others to find.

The author of James compares the tongue to a small fire that can set a forest ablaze. In our modern world, the internet can become a type of communication like the tongue. For many people, gossip on the internet has caused overwhelming damage in their lives. There are many people who believe what they read on the internet to be true simply because it is on the internet. Destructive words, whether spoken or written, can ruin a person’s reputation. The author reminds us we can use the tongue and other forms of communication to express our love of God or to destroy the lives of others.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

True Wisdom (3:13–18)

A man, known to be skeptical about the good deeds and words of others, believed everyone was out for personal gain. His mantra in life was, “What’s in it for me?” He believed everyone else thought this way. He claimed to be a realist about life and thought those who trusted others had an unrealistic and foolish view of life. Whenever someone pointed out his tendency toward skepticism he would answer it was not skepti-

cism, but wisdom about the tendencies of human nature. Human beings, he claimed, always had hidden and selfish motives behind their actions.

The author of James would challenge this man's so-called wisdom. He would identify him as being false to the truth, ignoring his own tendencies toward jealousy or selfish ambition. Those with true wisdom do not act with skepticism toward the good deeds of others, but they act with the wisdom of the Lord. True wisdom recognizes the good in others and brings peace, mercy, and acceptance to others. Some people are ambitious and self-seeking, but many others are loving and kind. These latter show concern for others and possess true wisdom.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Causes of Division (4:1–12)

When Pope Francis made his first appearance as pope after his election, he greeted the crowd in a humble and loving manner that immediately electrified the crowd. He now held the highest office in the Roman Catholic Church, and he did not treat his office with pride or arrogance but with a sense of service and love. He expressed a concern for the poor, willing to mourn with them by entering into their suffering and need. He sought to live in as frugal and simple a manner as he could in this high office in the Church. This would be a hallmark of his pontificate.

The author of the Letter of James would identify with the attitude of Pope Francis. The author tells his readers not to love the world but to love God, speaking well of others and not judging them. He recognizes some people want to love God, but they love the world more. In doing this, they are people with two minds, one directed toward good and the other directed to the more powerful realm of the world. Pope Francis has one mind—love of God and neighbor. He shows no concern for worldly glory.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL STUDY (JAMES 4:13—5)

Day 1: Warning Against Presumption (4:13–17)

The author of James challenges those who have made specific plans for trading and making profit, reminding them their life is like a mist that appears for a short time and disappears. In reality, they cannot plan for tomorrow. Instead of planning as if they have control of their own lives, they should always live with the idea they will perform their future deeds only if God wills it. Those who do not take God's will into account are boastful and arrogant, and—as such—are sinful. Because the author has continually been speaking about a person's manner of acting, he is consistent in stating anyone who knows what is right and does not do it commits sin.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

A rich contractor in a small town where he was the only contractor often charged the people he served more for his services than an ordinary contractor would charge, and he used inferior materials in his buildings, sure that those who hired him would never discover how he cheated them. He told a friend who knew about his tactics that he intended to become an honest contractor after five years, once he secured enough funds to assure him and his family of a strong financial future. Since he considered himself a religious man, he intended to repent and live a good life when the five years ended. Unfortunately, he died unrepentant just short of his fifth year of work.

The author of James warns against such a presumptive way of thinking. He warns those who say, “Today or tomorrow I will make a profit with the hope of changing my ways,” may not live until tomorrow. He warns that those, who know the right thing to do and omit doing it, commit a sin. Knowing death can overtake us at any

moment, the author is saying we should not wait until tomorrow to live well but should start living close to the Lord today.

✕ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 2: Warning the Rich (5:1–6)

The author of James urges the rich to weep for the miseries they will be enduring. He is speaking of the judgment in store for those who glory in their wealth and he speaks as if the end were already taking place. Their wealth is rotting, their fine clothing is moth-eaten, their gold and silver corroded, and the corrosion will be a testimony against them. Unlike the faithful who have laid aside a glorious treasure for the last day, the treasure laid aside by the rich will be like a burning fire that will consume them. All the cheating they have done in their lives will cry out against them. The lost wages of the laborers and the cries of the harvesters will have “reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” (5:4).

In contrast to this judgment, the author reminds the rich they have lived a life of luxury and pleasure, fattened like animals for the day of slaughter. This day of slaughter is Judgment Day. The author tells the rich they are the ones who have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who offered them no resistance. The “righteous one” is not a reference to a particular person but to the poor who are unable to offer resistance.

When the author writes about the rich in this passage, he is placing his emphasis on those who are rich and cheat others. Their main concern is wealth, with little concern for God or others.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

A rich man, who was accustomed to people treating him with respect and deference, was growing old and had to have a leg amputated because of poor circulation. He sadly told a friend who was sitting by his bedside that all his wealth could not bring him good health. He was dying and, for the first time in his life, he was out of control of his destiny. Whatever he wanted in life, he could get.

Now, he felt like he was in prison and very much afraid to die. No matter how much money he had, he could not pay anyone to keep him from dying.

His friend became shocked when the once-powerful rich man began to cry. He wept, saying he was not accustomed to being so weak and unable to care for himself. He had it all, but he now realized he lacked the real necessities, namely the abilities to trust God and treat others with respect and dignity. He grabbed his friend's sleeve and cried out, "Don't let me die. I'm scared!"

Weeks later, when the friend stood before the rich man's casket, he remembered those last moments and recalled the words of Scripture that said all wealth is fleeting: "Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). The author of James warned that the cries of the workers cheated by the rich were crying out to the Lord. The days of luxury and oppression would end, and the person must come before the Lord. Jesus told a story about a rich fool who had such a bountiful harvest that he planned to build larger barns to store all his grain and other goods and live a life of luxury. But God said, "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?" (Luke 12:20).

✱ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 3: Patience and Oaths (5:7–12)

Shortly after the resurrection of Christ, the people looked forward to his Second Coming, which they expected to occur soon. When the end did not come, they had to develop a new attitude toward the Second Coming. Central to this new attitude was the need to wait patiently and keep watch. The author begins this passage by urging his readers to be patient until the coming of the Lord. In urging his readers to be patient, he uses the image of a farmer who must wait through the autumn and spring rains before he can harvest his crops. In the same way, Christians are to remain patient and not grow weary, knowing at any moment the end could be at hand.

Some people, growing impatient, may begin to complain about one another, but the author warns them to avoid such grumbling so they will not be judged for it. The Judge, namely Jesus the Lord, is standing before the gates, ready to enter. In the Old Testament era, many of the towns were surrounded by walls into which homes were built. Gates were the only entrance to the town. The author of James pictures the Lord as standing in front of the gates, prepared to enter. This is meant to be an image of the last day.

In urging his readers to remain patient, the author chooses examples from the prophets of the Old Testament who spoke in the name of the Lord. Because of their endurance, these prophets are called blessed. The author recalls the perseverance of Job. By examining the life of Job, Christians are better able to understand God's purpose, knowing the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

The author adds an exhortation about swearing that actually has nothing to do with the preceding passage. He tells his readers not to swear by heaven or earth or use any oaths. Since the Letter of James is apparently written by a Christian Jew, he would naturally avoid using the sacred name of God in an oath, since Jews did not speak God's name. The author therefore speaks of not "swearing by heaven," in place of using the phrase "swearing by God."

The author reflects the message found in Matthew 5:33-37 concerning oaths. They should be so trustworthy that their "yes" and "no" are acceptable to others. If they cannot reach this stage of trustworthiness, then they will be liable to condemnation.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

Trust in the Lord takes patience. A preacher once told his assembly God always answers prayers. If we pray for a million dollars, God will answer our prayer one dollar at a time. We will receive our answer in God's good time, and in the meanwhile, we must be patient. In answering our prayer, God never says "no," but God says "yes...but be patient," or God says, "I have a better idea. Trust me!"

Praying and trusting God can take most of a person's life, but God is always answering the person's prayer in some manner. The story of St. Monica, who prayed most of her life for her son, Augustine, is an example of dedication and patient prayer. As a result of her prayers, Augustine not only converted to Christ but also became a major theologian in the Church and was canonized.

Patience is one of the major signs of trusting God. Just as the farmer must be patient while the seeds germinate and grow into a large crop, so we must be patient as our prayers germinate to the point where God produces the harvest for which we pray. The author of the Letter of James reminds us the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Keeping this in mind helps us to pray with perseverance and patience.

✧ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 4: The Power of Prayer (5:13–20)

The author of James strives to encourage his audience with a message about prayer in conflict. The one who is suffering should pray, while the one who is happy should sing songs of praise. The one who is sick should send for the “presbyters of the church,” who in turn should pray over the sick person and anoint him or her in the name of the Lord. This concept originated in the early Jewish communities where the elders served as the leaders of the people. The presbyters in this passage serve a ministerial as well as a leadership role. Their prayers will save the sick persons, and the Lord will raise them up. More important to the early community was the forgiveness of sins, and the author reminds us that this forgiveness takes place through the prayers and anointing of the Church.

The author of James urges Christians to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another in order to receive healing. The author declares that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. As an example, he recalls Elijah, a human being like us, who prayed intensely that it would not rain, and it did not rain for three years and six months.

Rain returned only when Elijah prayed for it, thus allowing the land to bring forth the harvest. The author is reminding the community of the power of prayer. No one should think of himself or herself as powerless when it comes to prayer.

The author turns his attention to those who wander from the faith and the ministry of the community to one who is thus spiritually sick. He emphasizes the gifts given by God to the one who returns as well as to those who bring about the return. The sinner will be saved from spiritual death, and those who bring the sinner back will save their own souls and cover a multitude of sins, a statement that could include forgiveness for the sins of the community.

The Letter of James ends abruptly, which serves as another piece of evidence that the Letter of James was not a letter in the truest sense.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

A very ill woman was about to undergo a serious and dangerous operation. Her doctors assured her that as serious as the operation was, they had every reason to believe she would come through it successfully. When her pastor arrived to celebrate the sacrament of anointing of the sick, she became frightened. In catechism class, she learned that the anointing was known as the last rites, and she asked with some concern whether this meant she was dying. After her pastor assured her the Church anointed with words that prayed for healing and explained the sacrament, she relaxed.

In James, the author speaks of people summoning the presbyters (ordained priests) when people are sick, and presbyters are to pray over the sick, anoint them, and offer a prayer directed toward saving the sick and bring healing to them. The text tells us that if those who are ill have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Review Questions

1. Give examples of presumption in our life according to the thinking of the author?
2. What warning does the author give to those who are rich and oppress others?
3. Why does the author feel a need to speak of patience to his readers?
4. How do we use the author's words about anointing the sick in our sacrament of anointing today?
5. What is the reward for the person who brings a sinner back to the Lord?