

JAMES: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Week 1:
Redefining Joy

This includes:

1. Leader Preparation
2. Lesson Guide

1. LEADER PREPARATION

LESSON OVERVIEW

James begins his letter with a teaching that is both countercultural and counterintuitive. He tells his readers that they should find joy when going through difficult experiences. He later says that someone who endures these types of circumstances is actually blessed. In this lesson, college-age participants will consider redefining what it means to have joy and blessings. Our greatest joy comes from knowing God in new and deeper ways.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. WHAT: Despite our natural inclinations, our greatest joy can be found in the hardest times of life.
2. WHY: We often look for the fastest ways to get out of our trials, yet James teaches that these can be the times of greatest growth and joy.
3. HOW: This lesson will help participants discover how to redefine joy and blessing, and will help them see that joy comes from having the opportunity to be more desperate for Jesus.

PRIMARY SCRIPTURE

James 1:1-18

SECONDARY SCRIPTURE

Matthew 5:3-11

TEACHING PREP

The short overview below is designed to help you prepare for your lesson. While you may not want to convey this information word-for-word with participants, you'll definitely want to refer to it as you lead your lesson.

Read James 1:1-18.



LEADER
TIP



James opens his letter with a teaching that is both countercultural and counterintuitive. He declares that our greatest growth and our greatest joy can actually come when we face the hardest times in life.

It is normal for us to run from things that make us uncomfortable. As sinful humans, our typical response to adversity is to hide and deflect. But James teaches that we can experience growth in the midst of those difficult situations. He is essentially teaching us that anything that helps us become more like Jesus should bring us great joy.

As we begin studying James, we will see that living a life committed to Jesus looks radically different from the rest of the world. Being a part of God's kingdom means living by the way of the kingdom. The world tells us to avoid pain at all costs, while James teaches to consider troubled times as an opportunity for great joy because we are increasing our faith.

This week, challenge participants to redefine what it means to have joy. Focus on how the greatest joy they will ever experience is getting to know the God of the universe better and that nothing from this world can offer that kind of satisfaction.

THE BEFORE & AFTER [OPTIONAL]

Text Message Questions

We've provided a couple of different text message questions to send out to participants prior to your meeting. Feel free to use one or both of the questions below. As with the rest of the curriculum, edit these questions to fit the needs of your ministry.

- What were some of the hardest situations you've ever faced? Has a tough situation ever brought you joy? Considering sharing with the group tonight.
- How can life's difficulties produce lasting joy and growth? Let's talk about it tonight.



Continuing the Conversation

We've provided you with some thoughts below that you can post on your blog or a social networking site following the lesson. Our hope is to encourage you and your college-age participants to continue the conversation after the lesson ends. Feel free to edit and customize the content to fit your ministry needs.

Living for Jesus and his kingdom looks radically different compared to living by our culture's standards. The world tells us to run from anything that is dangerous, troubling, or uncomfortable. But as we learned in James, the greatest joy we experience can actually come in the hardest times of life. That's right—great joy and troubled times all in the same sentence. James teaches us that the troubled times of life actually provide us with an opportunity to increase our faith and get to know Jesus in deeper ways. As a follower of Christ, what can bring any greater joy? This week, take time to read through James 1 and ask yourself if you are running from life's tough situations or running to them with joy, knowing you have an opportunity to become more like Christ.



JAMES: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Week 1:
Redefining Joy

2. LESSON GUIDE

GETTING THINGS STARTED [OPTIONAL]

As you begin, welcome your participants and invite them into your meeting area. Open in prayer, and then ASK:

- *When faced with a difficult life situation, what is typically your first response? Why?*
- *Have you ever felt joy in the midst of a difficult time? If so, tell us about it. If not, do you believe it's even possible?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *It's natural for us to avoid rough circumstances at any costs. None of us would wish that hard times would come our way. But what if we could find joy in the midst of life's toughest challenges? God's way of doing things is much different from our way of doing things. Instead of trying to avoid tough situations at all costs, like we typically might do, we can approach the harder circumstances of life with a different attitude.*

If you came up with an opening activity, movie clip, or game that worked well with your group, and you'd like to share it with other small group leaders, please email us at ideas@simplyyouthministry.com.



LEADER
TIP

TEACHING GUIDE

The goal of the Teaching Points is to help participants capture the essence of each lesson with more discussion and less lecture-style teaching. The main points we have chosen here are (1) God's way of doing things is much different from ours, (2) God can give us the greatest joy when we are in the hardest times, and (3) Jesus is our greatest reward.



LEADER
TIP

Remember: All throughout these lessons, it's up to you to choose (1) how many questions you use, and (2) the wording of the main points—keep ours, or change the wording to make it clearer for your audience.



LEADER
TIP

Read James 1:1-18 together as a group. Consider having one or more of the participants read the text.



SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *James' words must have astonished his readers. The idea of finding blessings or joy in the midst of hard times is completely counterintuitive. Let's spend a few minutes discovering some truths from what he wrote.*

1. God's way of doing things is much different from ours

ASK:

- *If you could chart the course of your life, controlling everything that happened along the way, what your life look like?*
- *In this passage, what are some specific examples of how God's way of doing things is different from how most of us would expect things to be done—or examples of how the way we ought to live as Christians is different from what our culture says?*
- *Compared to an "ordinary" season of life, do we need more wisdom, less wisdom, or the same amount of wisdom when going through difficult times? Why?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *James essentially says God takes the mindset and worldview of our culture and flips it upside down. God wants us to see the rich and poor differently. God wants us to view difficult situations differently. God wants us to think differently about joy and blessings and what matters most in life.*

2. God can give the greatest joy when we are in the hardest times

ASK:

- *James tells us that troubled times give us an opportunity for great joy. Why would we be blessed in such difficult circumstances?*
- *Look at the process James describes in verses 3-4. Testing produces endurance or steadfastness, which produces completeness and maturity. Think of a specific example of how you've seen God use this process in your life. What was it like to go through it, and how do you look at that experience now?*
- *Consider circumstances that you have tried hard to avoid. Have you consider them to be blessings? Why or why not?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *In order for us to even wrap our heads around the things that James wrote, we must have a biblical worldview. The world teaches us that our*



greatest joy comes from happiness, success, money, and security. God flips that worldview upside down and says that our greatest joy comes from knowing him more deeply. Like James, we can consider it a great joy when we are faced with troubled times, because as followers of Christ, we know that we are getting closer to our heavenly reward.

3. Jesus is our greatest reward

ASK:

- *What are some specific rewards that the world tells us will bring us great joy? How are these rewards different from what James writes about in this passage?*
- *Based on the way you currently live life, what would the people around you say is your reward? Why? What are you striving for?*
- *In verse 18, James says that we are God's firstfruits or his prized possession. What emotions are stirred inside of you when you think of God seeing you that way? How easily do you believe that it's true?*
- *Think about the things you currently consider blessings. Do they bring you closer to knowing Jesus? Why or why not?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *Instead of striving after the blessings or joy of this world, James says, we can pursue anything that gets us closer to God. Instead of seeing troubled times as something to avoid at all costs, we must begin to consider these situations as blessings that get us closer to our reward. Instead of pursuing the joys and blessings of this world, we can pursue Jesus and find our blessings in anything that brings us closer to him.*

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION [OPTIONAL]

Ask participants to form groups of two or three for these questions.

ASK:



- *Read Matthew 5:3-11. What correlations do you see between what Jesus spoke in Matthew 5 and what James wrote in James 1?*
- *How are the ways and standards of Jesus different from those of the world? Give some specific examples.*



- *Think back on the last five years of your life. Which situations have produced the greatest growth in your faith? Why?*

Bring everyone back together, and ask for volunteers to share some of their answers or insights, as time permits.

APPLICATION

ASK:

- *What situations are you currently avoiding that could potentially bring some of the greatest joy?*
- *Based on these new perspectives on joy and blessing, identify two specific situations that could give you the opportunity to become more like Jesus.*
- *What areas of your life need to look less like the world's standards and more like God's?*
- *As a follower of Jesus, what reward(s) are you currently living for that ought to be aligned to Jesus' definition of blessing and reward?*

SUMMARY

End your lesson here. Provide participants with a quick summary or take-home challenge based on (1) the content of this lesson, (2) the dialogue that took place during the lesson, (3) your understanding of the issues and struggles individuals are facing, and (4) the big picture of your ministry and what your leadership team wants accomplished with the teaching and discussion time.



**LEADER
TIP**

SCRIPTURE TO PROCESS

Encourage and/or challenge participants to engage with the passage below. We encourage you to return to these passages throughout the series to illustrate their point of connection to God's story.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

