



# KINGDOM CULTURE



Second Baytown Small Groups





## WEEK 5: INVITES UNCOMMON LIVING

**Looking Back:** What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

**Looking Up:** Play the video and go through the discussion questions.

1. How do you respond to the opening illustration about small towns and big towns? In what ways do you have to commit to a life that's different than most everyone else in order to follow Jesus?
2. Do you feel that tension? Does it feel like you're among the few, or are most people you know following Christ authentically? Why does it matter?
3. Since Jesus forgives us of our sins, why does it matter how we live each day?
4. Read James 3:12. How does this verse and the statement, "It's impossible to actually follow Jesus and not live like Jesus" challenge you personally?

5. Read 1 John 3:9-10. Why is it impossible for a person who is connected to Christ to keep on sinning?
6. "Faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). That means God is looking for people who have the kind of faith that shows up in real life situations. In what real-life situation are you currently needing to demonstrate the faith in your heart? How does this week's teaching session encourage you in that?
7. Our title for this series has been "You Have Heard It Said." Read Romans 12:2. What does this verse say to you about living according to a standard of tradition or the thoughts of the "many"?
8. How is God speaking to you about your life going forward? How can this group help?

**Looking Forward:** How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your next meeting and spend some time in prayer together.

## WEEK 5: LET'S TALK ABOUT THE FEW

### DAY 1—READ JAMES 4:12

*There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*

Our natural tendency is to think more of ourselves than we should. That's one reason few people take the narrow road of following Jesus. We lean into our own desires and opinions and resist considering another. What we find throughout the Bible, though, is that the best way to develop a right view of self is to develop a right view of God. And when we humbly and selflessly submit to God and His design for our lives, it impacts everything—including how we think about others.

A common misconception today is that all judging is wrong. The many, those on the wide path, often think the best way is to simply live and let live. They want to live their own "truth" and accept however others want to live theirs. In God's Word, though, we find that this is not the way of the few. Believers are instructed to judge whether or not someone is a false teacher (see Matthew 7:16), unrepentant (1 Corinthians 5:9-13), and even right or wrong in a civil dispute (1 Corinthians 6:1-6). On the other hand, here in James 4 and in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, we learn there is a type of judging that is prohibited.

In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus said the best way to avoid judging people inappropriately is to keep a humble attitude. In other words, develop a right view of God so that you can develop a right view of yourself and others. When you do that, you'll recognize your own faults instead of rushing to point out the faults of others. There is only one Person who has the right to sit in the judgment seat, and you are not Him.

What does James 4:12 teach you about God? About yourself? About others?

**Read Luke 6:37. What does this verse teach you about the type of judging the few are instructed not to do?**

**In what relationship(s) are you prone to think, speak, or behave in pride and judgment? How is God speaking to you about that this week?**

**Thank God that He is Lord. Thank Him for the relationships He has given you with other people, and ask Him to lead you to relate to them in a way that honors Him.**



**DAY 2—READ JOHN 14:6**

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

If you have lived as a Christian for any amount of time, these words are probably familiar to you. But more often than not, familiarity is the enemy of understanding. Jesus's words in John 14:6 are nothing short of life-altering and paradigm-shifting. Jesus not only claimed to be the one and only way to the Father, but He also explained that He is the fullness and embodiment of truth. Because Jesus is truth, He is able to lead us to the Father.

A popular, though mistaken, belief held by many today is that truth is relative. But Jesus disagrees. Jesus claimed to be the truth. His statement in John 14:6 is absolute. He is *the* way. He is *the* truth. He is *the* life. No one comes to God except *through* Jesus. Truth does not exist outside of who Jesus is because He is the author of truth. Choosing truth, then, is loving, because choosing truth is choosing Jesus.

Choosing the truth we find in Jesus is the path of only a few, but that is the only path that leads us to the Father. All of our hopes and desires are found in the truth of Jesus. The gospel is not only the most loving message the world has ever known, but it also is the most truthful.

**In your own words, what does it mean that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life?**

**How is sharing the gospel with someone who does not know it a form of loving the truth?**

**What are the implications if someone rejects Jesus?**

**Thank Jesus for making clear the way, the truth, and the life. Ask Him to help you worship Him fully each day in a way that reflects that you know Him as the way, the truth, and the life.**

**DAY 3—READ JAMES 3:12**

*Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*

James's audience was primarily Jewish converts who would have been skilled at modifying their behavior to make sure everything looked good from the outside. Can you relate? Do you ever show up to church without having given Jesus much thought during the week? Does your private life match your public life? Are you seeking Jesus and following Him always, or only in the places and conversations where people expect that from you?

The larger context of these words in James 3:12 is about the words we speak. That's because even the few of us who are on the narrow path of following Jesus can control the way we act and the way we present ourselves. But we can't control our tongues. That doesn't mean we can't use words that make it sound like we're following Jesus when our hearts are far from Him. But sooner or later, the words we say will betray us, which points to the truth that we need help. Our words reveal our sinful hearts, which are desperately sick (see Jeremiah 17:9).

James wasn't saying our words are our biggest problem, though. He was using our words as a way of pointing our attention to the darkness of our hearts. The fact is, we can't bear the fruit of the Spirit if we are not living in active dependence on the Spirit. So ask yourself, are you trying to APPEAR as someone who trusts and follows Jesus, or are you actually someone who does trust and follow Jesus? The few don't fake it.

In your own words, what point does James 3:12 make?

Which of the questions or descriptions in the devotion reading stand out to you most? Why?

How have your words, whether public or private, shown you the sinfulness in your heart?

**Thank God for changing you from the inside out. Ask Him to continue to grow you so that your words and actions match the righteousness in Christ you have received.**



**DAY 4—READ 1 JOHN 3:9-10**

*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.*

John gave us a clear view of the few. Our words aren't the only indicator of our hearts. The way we live, the way we spend our money, the way we treat other people, what we do in public and in private—everything about us gives a sense about the condition of our hearts.

It's one thing to claim to be born again; it's another to offer evidence of the fact. Because we are so dramatically changed by the grace of God when we become Christians, our lives will always reflect that. Just as you can certainly identify the type of tree growing by the fruit it produces, so you can identify the children of God by their lives.

So, then, what does it say if you claim to be a follower of Christ but distance yourself from the truth of that claim by your life? Or what happens if someone knows you claim to be a Christian, but disregards the truth of the gospel because of the way you have treated them? The way we live matters because we don't want to be partners with the devil, which is exactly what happens when we embrace a life outside of the one that Christ has called us to. Show the world that you know Him through the way that you live.

**Based on these verses, how would you describe the depth of the change Jesus brings in us?**

**Think about your actions this week. Do they reflect that you know Christ?**

**Where do you have room to grow in your walk?**

**Thank God for the change Jesus has brought and is bringing to your life. Ask Him to reveal areas where you need to be more in line with His Word.**

**DAY 5—READ JAMES 2:22-23**

*You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;<sup>23</sup> and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.*

James’s theme throughout his book is that genuine faith produces a genuine life. He wrote to Christian Jews to help them understand that you can’t have “religion” without a “relationship.” James wanted to make it clear that our action is evidence of our faith. You can’t have one without the other. Faith and works go hand-in-hand. They compliment each other and are both necessary in the Christian’s life. Real faith is a vibrant faith. To illustrate this truth, James pointed to the life of Abraham.

Abraham heard God. Abraham believed God. Abraham acted on that belief. Abraham followed God. His faith compelled him to active obedience. His faith gave him an intimate relationship with his Creator.

James was not saying we need to try harder to somehow measure up to Abraham. Works do not prove our faith as much as they indicate the condition of our hearts. The whole point of faith is growing in depth of relationship with Jesus Christ. Seeing the relationship between faith and works is an invitation to love God more and serve others well.

What enabled Abraham to exhibit such faith in God?

How is this same level of faith available to all who follow Jesus today?

Where do you struggle to demonstrate the kinship between faith and works? Knowing that such struggles are a condition of the heart, what can you do to grow?

Pray that your faith would be evidence of vibrant love for God and others, demonstrated through works. Ask God to help you see the relationship between faith and works. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you live out your faith in a way that demonstrates that you have been changed by Jesus.



# COMMENTARY

## WEEK 1

## LUKE 17:20-21

17:20–21. The focus shifts again from disciples to Pharisees. They had another question for Jesus: When will the kingdom of God come? The Pharisees had logic and reason behind their question. They knew all the apocalyptic expectations raised by the Jews as Roman oppression grew and the era of prophecy faded further into the dark pages of yesteryear. Would Jesus openly admit he was the Messiah, bringing the kingdom, and thus make himself an enemy of Rome? Would he affirm the signs and wonders of contemporary apocalyptic writings and teachings? Or would his teachings be so radically new that the people would quit listening to him?

As usual, Jesus confounded them. They wanted to know signs of the times. They wanted to be able to be the first to predict and be prepared for the in-break of God's kingdom on earth to reestablish David's rule. You will not see anything different, Jesus told them. The kingdom stands among you right now. People do not have to go out searching for it and come back reporting that they have found it here or there. The kingdom of God is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present in a different manner than they expected. Signs such as the healing of the lepers should show them the presence of the kingdom.

## ROMANS 10:2-4

10:2–3 Both zeal and true knowledge are necessary if one is truly to know God and serve him. In his zeal as a non-Christian Pharisee, Paul (then called Saul; see Ac 7:58 and note there) persecuted the church (Ac 22:3–5). Likewise, zeal among unbelieving Jews led to Jesus's unjust execution. In spiritual blindness they not only missed God's way of righteousness, they opposed it.

10:4 Christ is the end of the law in being both its fulfillment and its termination. Any system of salvation based on performance is excluded.

## LUKE 16:14-15

16:14. The disciples (v. 1) were not the only people listening to Jesus. Pharisees, constantly on the watch to trap him, eavesdropped. Naturally, they scoffed at such teaching. They were in the upper financial and social echelons of Jewish society and wanted to do everything by the rules. Luke describes them with one phrase: lovers of money. They tried to serve two masters and thought they were doing a fine job of this. They had no intention of being generous with their money except on those public occasions when it raised their esteem in the eyes of the public.

16:15. Their actions had one purpose—to win public approval and to make others think they were God's favorite people. The public may see you as righteous, religious, and wise. God knows otherwise. What people admire, God detests. So take your choice. Who will be your master—the people or God? In whose eyes do you want justification: people's or God's?

## ROMANS 13:8-10

13:8–10 The Christian is to pay all his obligations, but there is one debt we can never repay. This is the debt of love. Some have misinterpreted this verse as prohibiting all monetary debt, including having a mortgage on a house or buying a car on an installment plan. It may be wise never to go into monetary debt (cp. "the borrower is a slave to the lender," Pr 22:7), but this verse has little to do with modern methods of finance. It is about fulfilling obligations of all kinds. We can never stop loving as long as we live. Love fulfills the law because if we love our neighbor we will do him no harm. We fulfill the first four commands by loving the Lord and the rest of the law by obeying the prohibitions as we love our neighbor.

## ISAIAH 40:7-8

40:6–8 Another herald compared humanity to grass and the flowers of the field, both of which have short-lived and fragile beauty. The contrast is with the word of God that endures. Perhaps the contrast implies that the Babylonians, though seemingly powerful, would fade, but God's word that had promised his people restoration would not fail. Peter quotes these words in 1Pt 1:24–25.



## WEEK 2

## 1 JOHN 2:9-11

2:9–11. The imagery of light and darkness continues, stating that a person cannot walk in light and darkness at the same time. If he hates his brother, he walks in darkness. If he loves his brother, he walks in light. This is not claiming that we need to be fond of every other Christian or emotionally bonded to all believers. Love (agape) can be understood as the steady direction of the will for the good of another. We are not commanded to “feel” a certain way toward others, but only to “act” properly toward them. Understood this way, when we act properly toward our Christian brothers, out of a desire to be obedient to God, we love them.

Some interpreters have accused John of less than Christian values for not teaching here that we ought to love not just our Christian brothers but even our enemies, as Jesus taught. John certainly didn't disagree with Jesus' teaching. His point in this book, however, was specifically to address a situation which the Ephesian Christians faced—a person claiming to be a Christian but refusing to love his fellow Christians.

## 1 JOHN 1:8-10

1:8. We do not know if the false teachers were suggesting that the Ephesian believers were without sin, or if that is an error the Ephesian believers fell into by themselves. Either way, it needs to be corrected. A person might not be conscious of sin, but this does not mean he or she is free from it.

There are two kinds of sin—doing those things we ought not to do and not doing those things we should do. The longer we walk with Christ, the more likely it is that we will put aside more and more of the things we ought not to do. If we came to Christ as adults, we might be successful in putting away many of the overt sins we committed during our non-Christian days. We might no longer smoke and get drunk and curse and treat others abusively. We might go through a day or more in which we are not aware of committing an obvious sin.

On the other hand, when we grasp that we are to do all the things that Jesus would do if he were in our shoes, we fail continually. None of us loves perfectly as Jesus did. Therefore, we sin, because a failure to love perfectly is a sin. If we think we are without sin altogether, we are deceived and we live a lie.

1:9. John comforts us, however, with the truth that even though we have sin in our lives, we can still be purified from this sin and maintain our fellowship with God (and resultant fellowship with other believers).

Scholars offer two major interpretations of this verse. The first possible meaning is that this confession refers to the confession of sin at salvation. It is a once-for-all confession that solves the problem of eternal judgment for sin. The reasoning is that if it referred to sins we commit after salvation, we might die after we commit a sin but before we confess it. Therefore, that sin would be unforgiven, since this verse teaches that we are not forgiven until we confess. If so, we would go to hell. Since the Bible doesn't seem to allow a person to lose his or her salvation, the reasoning goes, it must be referring to confession at salvation.

Others take this interpretation a step further and teach that a Christian does not have to confess his sins and ask forgiveness from God after he has become a Christian because a believer already has forgiveness in Christ (Eph. 1:7). Many Christians, according to this understanding, spend too much time in morbid introspection. They wonder if they have confessed all their sins and if they are in fellowship with God or not. They never experience freedom in Christ. This is needless, since Christ has already granted us forgiveness. We do not have to keep track of our sins and confess them. We just have to live under the realization that our sins are already forgiven, enjoying our freedom in Christ.

It is true that all our sins are forgiven at the moment of salvation in the sense that none of our sins after salvation will keep us out of heaven. In that sense, all of our sins are forgiven, and we will never have to pay the penalty for those sins. This is the teaching of Ephesians 1:7.

This does not mean, however, that if a person sins after salvation he will go to hell. Verse 7 says that if we walk in the light—if we are saved, if we are children of light—then the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

This does not mean we no longer have to ask for forgiveness from God for our sins. This interpretation seems to miss the point given to us by our Lord in the disciple's prayer (Matt. 6:11–12). Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts" (trespasses). This is a needless instruction if we need not ask for forgiveness after our salvation.

This interpretation is contrary to our human experience. Yes, in a loving relationship we often get forgiveness before we ask for it, or without asking for it. But the healthy, sensitive, intimate relationships tend to be those in which the guilty person readily asks forgiveness from the offended party, not because forgiveness must be given or else the relationship will be broken, but because it is the loving and sensitive thing to do. It is careless and insensitive not to ask forgiveness for our sin against someone else, even though we may feel assured of receiving it.

The forgiveness John talks about in 1:9 can be understood as parental or familial forgiveness, not judicial forgiveness. That is, we all receive judicial forgiveness one time when we receive Jesus as our personal Savior (Eph. 1:7; Rom. 5:6–11). We were, at that time, saved from the penalty of our sins. It is called judicial forgiveness because it is granted by God acting as a judge. After our salvation, we still sin (Phil. 3:12; Jas. 3:2, 8; 4:17). This sin does not cause us to lose our salvation (Rom. 8:37–39), but it does break the fellowship between us and God, just as the sin of a child or a spouse breaks the fellowship with parents or a mate.

We confess our sin out of respect and love for the person we have sinned against. God forgives our sin, purifies us from all unrighteousness, and restores us to his fellowship. We need judicial forgiveness only once. We need parental or familial forgiveness whenever we sin.

The NIV translation, will forgive us our sins, is a valid translation, but the word our is not in the Greek text. Literally, it reads, "will forgive us the sins." It is possible to translate this as an article of previous reference, which contrasts "forgive us the sins" with all unrighteousness, which follows it. According to Hodges,

John's thought might be paraphrased, "If we confess our sins, he ... will forgive the sins we confess and moreover will even cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Naturally, only God knows at any moment the full extent of a person's unrighteousness. Each Christian, however, is responsible to acknowledge (the meaning

of "confess;" homologomen; compare 2:23; 4:3) whatever the light makes him aware of, and when he does so, a complete and perfect cleansing is granted him. There is thus no need to agonize over sins of which one is unaware (Zane C. Hodges, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, 886).

God's forgiveness of our sin under these conditions is based on his justice. He is just and will forgive our sins. We might expect that forgiveness in this instance is based on God's mercy, but it is based on his justice. God is just because Jesus paid the penalty for our sin when he died on the cross. God has promised to forgive our sins in Christ (2:2) when we confess them, and he will abide by his promises.

1:10. A number of verses in the Bible tell us that we will sin after conversion (Phil. 3:12; Jas. 2:10; 3:2, 8; 4:17). Because a Christian will sin after salvation, he should not deny his sin. If he does, he makes God out to be a liar. When a Christian realizes, through the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit, that he has sinned, he should agree with God about his sin, confess it, and receive the restoration to fellowship that is promised in the previous verse.

#### GALATIANS 5:16-18

5:16. The law was powerless to help a Christian overcome these sins. We may want to please God, but our sin nature continually pulls us into disobedience (Rom. 7). The answer to this battle between the old and new nature is found in the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit. To experience victory we must live or walk (kjv) by the Spirit. As we live our lives in dependence on, and obedience to, the Holy Spirit, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

5:17. Now Paul demonstrates the need for the Holy Spirit's enablement. The Christian will, this side of heaven, always experience conflict between the Holy Spirit and the flesh. Here flesh is not limited to the physical dimension of man but denotes anything less than and other than God in which man places trust that belongs to God alone. Paul gives a more complete description of this conflict in Romans 7.

5:18. In summary, Paul tells us that victory over sin is not the result of living under the law. Instead, it is the result of actively yielding to the Spirit. Therefore, both the first step of salvation and its ongoing steps (sanctification, growth in holiness) are brought about within

us by God's Spirit working through faith. To be saved, we must have faith in Christ. To walk in God's way, we must have faith in the Holy Spirit, for he empowers us to walk in obedience.

#### JOHN 4:16-18,39

4:16–18. Beginning with verse 16, Jesus pushed all metaphors aside and dealt in straight talk. Like this woman, we must recognize our sin and understand that God sees us for what we are. Surely the change in topic must have seemed abrupt, but again the woman did not miss a beat. What she said was true—she had no husband—at the moment. And the fact that she spoke the truth was the very point at which Jesus pinned down the reality.

Family connections were important in the Jewish religion and would soon become a major metaphor for the church. Believers are the bride of Christ who will attend the marriage supper of the Lamb. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Christians are brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Here was a woman who lived outside the boundaries of any religious or cultural standards of her day. A string of five husbands followed by a lover is certainly not unknown in the twenty-first century, but it is hardly common even in our permissive society with its twisted tolerance for evil. In first-century Samaria, such a domestic arrangement was unthinkable.

The gospel has social implications. The first requirement for eligibility to receive living water is a recognition of sin for what it is. In a passage which shows us Jesus' humanity (he was tired and thirsty) we also see his deity. He exercised the divine attribute of omniscience which we have already seen when he said to Nathanael, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you" (John 1:48). The woman picked up on this immediately and later told her neighbors, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (4:29).

4:39–41. We already know the woman had a change of heart and mind that indicated new birth. She had gone back to town to announce her meeting with Jesus. John reported that many Samaritans believed that day because of the woman's testimony. But since this is one of John's key words, he wanted to emphasize what actually happened in that town. Preliminary faith that rested on the woman's testimony became solid faith after the Savior had

stayed there two days and proclaimed his message.

How did Jesus witness? He was friendly; he asked questions; he showed concern for human need; he faithfully explained the Scriptures; and he emphasized good news for thirsty people. Witnesses are not responsible for converting people; their task is to tell the truth about what they know.

#### LUKE 7:47-50

7:47–50. Finally, Jesus was ready to make his point. Her many sins were forgiven. Jesus did not dispute the woman's condition with Simon. Both agreed how sinful she was. The question was how acceptable she was. Simon was repulsed at the sight of her presence. Jesus let her touch, kiss, and wash him. Why? Because she loved much. Because she was a human in need of divine grace. Because she needed what Jesus had to give—forgiveness and salvation. Ignoring any reply or reaction from Simon, Jesus spoke to the woman. Your sins are forgiven!

Now party guests gasped. How could anyone forgive sins? That was God's job. Who did this man Jesus claim to be? Again Jesus ignored them, focusing on the woman and her need: "Go on without worry. Your faith has saved you." Yes, Jesus the Savior's call for faith found a person ripe for the call. This was not a disciple of John the Baptist. Nor was she a religious leader in Israel. Nor was she a pious individual studying the Pharisees' decisions and seeking to obey their law. This was a woman, a sinner and an outcast. The least of these had become greater than the contemporary religious heroes. Only sinners answer the call for faith. Self-righteous people fail to see their need of it.

## WEEK 3

#### PSALM 46:10

46:8–11 The Lord is in absolute control of all warfare as well as peace among nations. The final command, stop your fighting, is probably addressed to the nations to stop their hostilities, which were ultimately directed against God (2:10).

## PSALM 130:5-6

130:5-6 Hope in adversity anticipates God's response on the basis of his word (119:42, 49, 74, 81).

## JOHN 15:7

15:7-8. The focus of this passage is on the positive side (the branches remaining) and the Lord put aside all reference to branches that are removed. He also indicated that fruit-bearing is to the Father's glory and that those who bear much fruit demonstrate their relationship to Christ.

The distinctive factor here links an effective prayer life with fruit-bearing. Carson sums it up: "In short, Christians must remember that the fruit that issues out of their obedient faith-union with Christ lies at the heart of how Jesus brings glory to his Father. Those who are contemplating the claims of the gospel, like John's readers, must reckon with the fact that failure to honour the Son is failure to honour God (5:23)" (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 518).

But John also talked here about complications in the application. Even when we understand the metaphor and grasp the analogy, we struggle with how best to make this work in our own lives. Let us understand Jesus' words: You are already clean; you must remain in me; your fruit glorifies God. Even in this temporary life, some things remain. The abiding realities of this passage include answered prayer, the Father's glory, and Jesus' affirmation of discipleship.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

5:16. Paul admonished, Be joyful always. This is short and to the point. The key, however, is the word always. Paul meant this literally. Christian joy is not bound by circumstances or hindered by difficulties. In fact, joy in the New Testament is often coupled with sorrow or suffering.

The Thessalonian believers had already experienced this strange duet, like an inspiring song played in minor key (1 Thess. 1:6). When the sorrow or suffering results from being identified with Christ, the Holy Spirit creates a supernatural joy—a wellness of soul that cannot be dampened by adverse situations. The explanation may be found in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

But we should remember that we have a part in this joy. We are the ones commanded to be joyful. It is a choice, a deliberate response that focuses on the grace and goodness of God. As the writer to the Hebrews directed us, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb. 12:2-3).

5:17. The next staccato note follows: pray continually. This means never stop praying. Paul was a busy missionary, and he wrote about the Christian's duty to fulfill daily responsibilities, so this is not a command about speaking non-stop prayers. It refers, however, to the attitude of prayer, or reverence before God. The Christian's life of righteousness and his approach to relationships and responsibilities should be such that he maintains a constant attitude of being in God's presence. Such a person will pray often and about many things, including requests, praise, and thanksgiving. This command also means that we should never quit praying.

5:18. The next command requires trust in the sovereignty of Christ: give thanks in all circumstances. It recognizes God's eminence in all events.

A thankful spirit does not come naturally to most of us. Certainly it pushes us beyond our natural capacities when difficult or painful situations invade our life. This command to be thankful, no matter what happens, is possible only by God's grace. When we can agree with God that he works all things out for good to those who love him and are committed to obedience (Rom. 8:28), then we can thank him.

For those who wonder about God's will, here it is emphatically stated: this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. There is no need for searching, seminars, books, or "fleeces." God's will is that we are to be joyful, prayerful, and thankful because we are his children.

## EZRA 8:23

8:22-23 The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him is literally "the hand of our God is upon all who seek him for good." Seeking God involves dependence on him alone through prayer and worship. Note the opposite is to abandon him.



## WEEK 4

## MATTHEW 13:44

13:44. As with the yeast (13:33), here also the kingdom is portrayed as being hidden from view. It was a kingdom of the spirit realm and human souls, which cannot be seen with physical eyes. This parable makes four points: (1) there is an “accidental” aspect to our discovery of the kingdom’s value, because each of us is so absorbed in going his own way that God must take the initiative to show us the kingdom (cf. Isa. 53:6; Matt. 18:12–14; Rom. 5:6–8; 1 John 4:10, 19); (2) when we do realize the value of the invisible kingdom, its value is cause for great joy; (3) the kingdom is worth everything we have and are; (4) to own the kingdom, we must accept all that comes with it. The field in the parable that cost everything the man owned represents the losses, hardships, and persecution a follower of Jesus is called on to endure for him.

Even though Jesus said that the joyful person hid the treasure again, he did not mean to say that believers should hide and hoard the kingdom. He included this detail to make the parable realistic. If the man had made known to others what was hidden in the field, someone else might have made a higher bid to the landowner, and the original finder would have lost the field and the treasure. The comparison between the treasure and the kingdom breaks down at this point, because there is only one Field with the treasure. But the kingdom is available to any who will come. The point is the incredible value of the kingdom.

## MATTHEW 19:21

19:20–21. The young man still did not grasp Jesus’ true meaning. He claimed to have kept all the commandments. Yet he knew that such observance was not enough. He asked, What do I still lack? No matter how good a person’s life may be, if he examines his conscience honestly, he will know that there is still something lacking about his own righteousness (Rom. 2:12–15).

Jesus’ answer went straight to this man’s self-righteous god—money. He read him perfectly. He knew where his heart and treasure lay (Matt. 6:21). To make such a sacrifice would be to exchange earthly wealth for treasure in heaven (cf. 6:19–20). But Jesus also knew that

this outward action would require first an inward transformation that was humanly impossible. Jesus attempted to drive the man to the point of seeing his real need.

## PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13

4:11. Paul makes clear that he was not hinting for another gift. He has solved his economic problems. How? Not with new resources but with a new attitude. He is content no matter what his circumstances. What is such contentment? It is a term apparently taken over from Stoic philosophers describing an inner spirit of freedom and discipline, the ability to conquer circumstances and situations rather than be conquered by them. Such an attitude is the exact opposite of worry and anxiety.

4:12–13. Paul spoke from experience. He had been through the extremes: surplus and poverty. He knew how to weather the dangers of both. This was his secret. Greek and Roman religions had secret initiation rites. Some religions and philosophies prided themselves on secret knowledge. Paul had a different kind of secret. His secret was his reliance on Christ, a reliance gained through his Christian experience. Stoics relied on personal will to gain contentment. Paul did not claim such personal inner strength. His strength came from Jesus living in him. Paul was in Christ and thus content no matter what his circumstances.

J. Vernon McGee writes:

Whatever Christ has for you to do, He will supply the power. Whatever gift He gives you, He will give the power to exercise that gift. A gift is a manifestation of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. As long as you function in Christ, you will have power. He certainly does not mean that he is putting into your hand unlimited power to do anything you want to do. Rather, He will give you the enablement to do all things in the context of His will for you (McGee, *Thru the Bible*, V:327–8).

The Christian life is not only difficult; it is also impossible unless we acquire the power to live it through Christ. To be sure, this truth does not come naturally to us but must be learned

## HEBREWS 13:5-6

13:5. Another threat to family stability is materialism. Obeying two features could control materialism. First, renounce love of money. Do not make the possession of money an end in itself. Second, be content with what you have. The presence of God in all of life encourages such contentment. Knowing the Lord will not abandon us gives us the stability to enjoy what he gives us (Deut. 31:6, 8). Enjoying his unfailing presence is better than coveting glistening bullions of gold.

13:6. Another threat to family life is anxiety. Encouraging words from Psalm 118:6–7 remind us that God’s presence in life banishes anxiety about personal needs. This is the only New Testament verse describing God as a helper. Hebrews 2:18 uses the verbal form of the word to picture Jesus as a source of help for the tempted (cf. Mark 9:22; 2 Cor. 6:2).

The question, What can man do to me? presumes the answer: “Nothing at all!” With God’s presence, no event in life can shake believers from their foundation. Anxiety about life’s needs or challenges has no place in the heart of the believer who has determined to make God his helper.

## ISAIAH 41:10

41:10 God’s statement “I am with you” is a concise way of describing the covenant relationship between him and his people. God’s right hand is often associated with his military might, thus his ability to protect his people.

## 1 PETER 5:6-7

5:6. In humbly following the Lord and submitting to him, we are bowing to his mighty hand or power. This is a far greater power than that of Satan (see Eph. 1:19–21 for a description of this power). The Old Testament speaks of God’s power to intervene in history for the sake of his people (Exod. 13:9; Deut. 26:8) and to exercise discipline by imposing suffering on his people (Job 30:21). The followers of Christ are to humble themselves under God’s mighty hand. Although it may allow us to experience deep pain and suffering, it will still protect us and bring us safely through.

Those who obey God in this manner find the promise that God may lift you up in due time. Trusting God in this way is another way to resist Satan, who would invite us in the midst of our pain to curse God and die. Trusting God ultimately leads to exaltation by him in “due time.” This description means either the time of Christ’s second coming or a time near at hand. God will bring persecution to an end.

5:7. Satan and his attacks have not been mentioned overtly, but another resistance method for believers appears here. As we trust God and his mighty power, we follow a God who cares deeply for us. Peter may have had in mind the words of Jesus (Matt. 6:25–34). If so, he borrowed them and placed them in the context and crucible of suffering and persecution.

Cast means “to throw something upon someone or something else.” This word suggests a deliberate decision of trust. We are to trust God with our anxiety, the things we worry about. The term (merimnan) means “to be drawn in different directions, to be divided or distracted.” Whatever we are anxious about tends to distract us from trusting God. It tends to pull us in different directions so that we do not depend on him. When we limp in this direction, we do not resist Satan, but play into his hand. He wants us to put more trust in ourselves and others as opposed to God.

Peter’s first-century readers, like their twentieth-century cousins, failed to remember this truth even in the midst of anguish and pain: God cares for you. The form in which the verb appears (present active indicative with the dative) indicates that God’s care and concern for believers is constant, ongoing, and unending. God is not indifferent to the suffering of his followers, but desires our active, humble trust in him, especially during difficult days.

## WEEK 5

## JAMES 4:12

4:12. God is the only Lawgiver and Judge, the one able both to save and destroy. Only God has the ability to enforce his laws and carry out his purposes. He allows no human being to share his role. A slanderous Christian attempts to play the role of God. God has no pleasure in those who practice slander.

Christians can easily come to the conclusion that we are free to show critical attitudes toward those who do wrong. The Bible warns us to leave this judgment with God. Only God has the competence to find and punish those who break his laws. Our calling is to respond in supportive love rather than biting criticism.

#### JOHN 14:6

14:4–6 Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (see note at 6:35, 48), and no one comes to the Father except through him. Jesus alone is able to provide access to God because he alone paid the penalty for our sins (Is 53:5; Heb 1:3). He is the truth (Jn 1:14, 17; 5:33; 18:37; cp. 8:40, 45–46) and all contrary claims are false. He alone is the life (1:4), having life in himself (5:26). He is thus able to confer eternal life on all those who believe in him (3:16). Jesus is truth and life, and he is the one and only way of salvation.

#### JAMES 3:12

3:11–12. These verses show the consistency of nature. Both verses ask questions to which the expected answer is “no.” The illustrations from nature would have been familiar to inhabitants of Palestine. Areas around the Dead Sea contained many salty springs. Farther north of the Dead Sea travelers could find springs emitting fresh water. One spring could produce only one type of water.

The farmers of Palestine produced figs, olives, and grapes in abundance. James emphasized that a tree produced its own kind of fruit. We don’t go to grapevines to find figs. We do not pluck olives from fig trees. Nature is consistent, but our tongues have never provided models of consistency.

The applications are so pointed they do not need to be made explicit. Colossians 4:6 provides a fitting conclusion: “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (nkjv).

In January 1917, the German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman sent a secret telegram to his country’s ambassador in Mexico. The message announced the intention of the German government to begin unrestricted submarine warfare against all nations on February 1. It also urged the German ambassador to encourage both Mexico and Japan to support the German plans in order to keep America neutral and out of the war efforts.

British intelligence intercepted the message and saw that President Woodrow Wilson read the dispatch. Wilson released the telegram to the press. America had been a neutral nation in the First World War until this time. The disclosure of German intentions in the telegram led Wilson to ask for a declaration of war against Germany. The deceitful words of the German foreign secretary goaded America into war.

In the same way that printed words can inflame passions and tempers, the spoken word can arouse people to action, either good or bad. Paul called us to use our tongues positively: “Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16, nkjv). In seeking to control our tongues we must admit to God our weakness, seek his help, and place relentless guard on our tongues. God’s grace can enable us to use our tongues and our words for blessing and encouraging others.

#### 1 JOHN 3:9-10

3:9–10 On does not sin, see note at v. 6. God’s seed is the gospel message. Believers are born of God by the work of his word, and this makes them able to do “what is right” (v. 7). Not able to sin means freedom from bondage to breaking God’s law and freedom to live as God’s children. John spoke of what spiritual rebirth makes obvious—not sinless perfection but a life surrendered fully to God.

#### JAMES 2:22-23

2:21–23 The example of Abraham and his offer of Isaac as a sacrifice (Gn 22:1–19) affirms James’s teachings about faith. What exactly a biblical author means by justified depends on the context in which he uses it. For instance, Paul (Gl 3:6–14) argued that “works of the law” cannot make one “justified” because he wished to make clear that salvation is a gift given only through faith. Abraham believed God, and his trust in God was counted as righteousness (Gn 15:6; Gl 3:6). James focuses more on the role good works play in proving faith genuine. Abraham’s faith was proven genuine by his obedience to God’s command. His faith made his good works possible.





# KINGDOM CULTURE



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