

making disciples
growing disciples
being disciples

FAITH THAT
WORKS

Our vision as a church is to be Making Disciples, Growing Disciples and Being Disciples. Of course, those 3 things overlap with each other – part of being a disciple is doing whatever you can to help others come to faith – in other words making disciples. And, no matter how long you have been a Christian, we should all be growing as disciples.

But whilst we should all be growing as disciples, as a church we have a responsibility not only for sharing the good news with others, but also for nurturing those who are young in the faith – those of us who have been Christians for some time should be helping younger Christians to grow. Those younger Christians might be the children and young people who are part of Christ Church, or they might be adults who have only

Christ Church
Homegroups
Autumn 2016

been Christians for a short time. And one of the saddest things in church life is to see young people drift away, or to see new Christians fade away because we haven't taken our responsibility to nurture them seriously.

So as we study the epistle of James, let's do it looking for how it can help us not only to grow as disciples ourselves, but also how we can take what we learn here and apply so that each of us who are part of a home group will take on that responsibility of helping others to grow as disciples.

That starts with making sure that our lives are centred on Jesus – without him, it is impossible to live a fruitful Christian life (see John 15:4-5). We know that, and yet all too easily our hopes and desires are controlled by the society we live in, rather than by Jesus himself. All too easily we want the gifts and not the giver. But then we go on to live out that passion for Jesus – in the world around, but also in Christ Church.

Unlike most of Paul's letters in the New Testament, James doesn't specify a particular church he was writing to. His letter is 'to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.' Although some have seen this as a reference to Jewish Christians, I think he is referring to the whole of the church. In the Old Testament the twelve tribes were the whole of Israel, God's people, but in New Testament times Paul could refer to the church as 'the Israel of God.' (Galatians 6:16)

So James' letter is to the whole church – which, of course, includes Christ Church. And his letter is very practical. It wasn't

that he thought what people believe was unimportant – he makes it clear that it is important. But his deepest concern was to see Christians growing and living out their faith.

And it is that which makes James' letter a good one to look at as we continue to work out what it means for us to grow disciples.

HOMEGROUP PROGRAMME for this term

w/b Mon 12th Sept Study 1 – What's your Passion?

w/b Mon 19th Sept Study 2 – In for the marathon?

w/b Mon 26th Sept Study 3 – Living to please God?

Wednesday 5th Oct Prayer Meeting

w/b Mon 10th Oct Study 4 – A Welcoming Church?

w/b Mon 17th Oct Study 5 – Sure I believe. So what?

w/b Mon 23rd Oct Free week

Wednesday 2nd Nov Prayer Meeting

w/b Mon 7th Nov Study 6 – Wise words

w/b Mon 14th Nov Study 7 – Putting the Lord first

w/b Mon 21st Nov Study 8 – Waiting, praying, caring?

1. What's your passion?

WELCOME

If you were given £100, what would you spend it on?

WORSHIP

Colossians 1:15-20 gives us a wonderful picture of the greatness of the Lord Jesus. Have someone read the passage, and then praise Jesus for who he is, and for what he has done for you.

WORD

It was a cold, rainy Saturday morning, a time when you would expect anyone to stay tucked up in bed! But instead, several people had gathered on a bleak, muddy field, and despite rainproof coats, were getting progressively drenched and chilled to the bone. Why were they doing it!

The answer, as any of you who are parents might have guessed, was that they were watching their young children play in a football match. And because of their care for their

children, they were willing to put up with the weather. Being there was more important than being warm and dry!

When I used the word 'passion' in the title for this session, that is the sort of thing I was thinking of. Not passion in the sense in which our society so often uses the word – desire. But in the sense of an overwhelming enthusiasm and commitment. So-to paraphrase the title of this session – what is it that you have your greatest enthusiasm for?

Read Psalm 63.

Psalm 63:1 is a real statement of passion. But looking at the rest of the psalm, are there things which David refers to which have given him this passion for God?

- Are there things which have happened to you which have made you feel more passionate about the Lord?
- What things does David's passion for God lead him to do? (v.3-5, v.6)
- How important are these things in your life?

I admit that when I read this psalm I feel a bit guilty. I'd like to have David's passion for the Lord – I think I should be like him, but I know that sometimes I'm not. How can this psalm help us not only to express our passion, but also to stimulate our passion?

Read James 1:1-4

We'll look more at this passage next week, but James' great desire is that Christians should become mature and complete. But the route to that is not always easy or comfortable. In John 15, Jesus said that he is the vine and we are the branches, and then went on: 'every branch that does bear fruit he (*God*) prunes so that it will be more fruitful. (John 15:2)

- What is the relationship between passion for Jesus and a willingness to accept suffering?
- How can you help a young Christian to maintain the passion for the Lord even if they are suffering in some way?

Read Romans 12:1-8

What do you think of when you hear the word 'church'? A building? A meeting on Sunday morning or evening? A group of people we meet with? An optional extra in the Christian life? In this passage Paul urges us to live new lives – lives given to the Lord as living sacrifices – but then goes on to say that the context for all this is the church – 'in Christ we who are many form one body.' (v.5)

- What do you think Paul means by saying that 'each member belongs to all the others'? (v.5)
- What might it mean for you to belong to the other members of Christ Church? Is that something you feel positive about, or negative?
- What do you think Paul would say to someone who claimed to be a Christian, but refused to be part of a church?

Earlier we thought about having a passion for the Lord, but I think that Paul also had a passion for the church. (See, for example, Colossians 1:24. It isn't the easiest of verses, but Paul was so passionate about the church that he was willing to suffer for it.)

- Why was Paul so passionate about the church?

As I said about Psalm 63, these words can make me feel guilty – do I have Paul's love for the church? What can we do to help our love grow, not only for the Lord, but also for his church?

WORK

A passion for Jesus will lead to having a passion for his church – it is, after all, the body of Christ. One of our problems with this is that we live in a society which is thoroughly individualistic, and because of that we tend to be individualistic about our faith.

Romans 12:3-7 tells us that we belong to the other members of the church, and that each of us has a role in building up the church. So what could you be doing over the coming term to build up Christ Church?

2. In for the marathon?

WELCOME

What is the longest journey you have ever been on (either in terms of distance or of time)?

WORSHIP

1 Peter 5:7 tells us to ‘cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.’ And Galatians 6:2 tells us that we should ‘carry each other’s burdens.’

The way that the Lord does show his care for us is often through one another. Praise God for the way he has used other Christians to help you.

WORD

I sometimes hear people say something along the lines of ‘wouldn’t it have been wonderful to have been alive in the days of the early church,’ and when I do hear that, my response is – ‘I’m not so sure!’ Certainly, as you read the Acts of the Apostles, you do see great things happening – many people being converted, and the church growing. I definitely would like to see that now.

But you also see problems and persecution. The first Christians often faced hostility from the Jews as well as from the Roman Empire. According to tradition, John was the only one of Jesus' disciples who didn't die a martyr's death. In fact, for many of the early Christians, turning to Christ brought them trouble that they didn't have before.

Today that kind of experience can easily drive people away from Christ. I've known several people over the years who have become Christians, but then when problems have come, or when God didn't do what they wanted him to, they gave up. Many others have felt like giving up – maybe you have at times. But the Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint, it demands perseverance and stamina.

Read James 1:1-18

In v.2, James refers to 'trials of many kinds.'

- What kind of trials do you think about when you read these verses?

- What is James' reaction to these trials? Is that how you react to them?

- Why should our attitude to the trials of life be different to that of the society around us?

- How does James say that trials can help us grow as Christians?

- Have you ever found that to be true?

When we go through a trial, what we need is wisdom to understand how God is blessing me through it, wisdom to know how to persevere, wisdom to make the right decisions in the trial. And in that context, James says *If any of you lacks wisdom you should ask God.*

- How is God described in v.5? How should this encourage us in our relationship with God?

- Do you ever doubt that God is like this?

- Look at verses 13-15. Do you ever feel tempted to blame God when things go wrong?

- What happens if we do start blaming God?

Read Luke 6:17-26

- What is the problem with being rich, well fed, happy and popular?

- In a society which would see these things as the most important things in life, how can we live differently without seeming completely out of touch?
- And how can we help younger Christians to see the importance of doing this?

In James 1:1, the word translated 'scattered' implies those who are absent from their homeland, strangers in a strange country. The early Christians certainly thought of themselves as 'strangers and pilgrims on earth' (Hebrews 11:13)

- Do you think that Christians today in Britain feel too much 'at home' in this world?
- How might setting our sights on 'the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him' (verse 12) help us to live our lives now?

WORK

'Blessed in the one who perseveres under trial.' But as we remembered in our worship when Christians do face trials they need their brothers and sisters to help them.

Are there Christians that you know of at present who are facing 'trials of many kinds'? They may be people known to you personally, or people you have only read about. They might be local, or could be Christians in other countries who are suffering persecution for their faith, or enduring extreme poverty.

Of course, it is always right to pray for such people, but what could you do **practically** to help?

3. Living to please God?

WELCOME

What is the most boring thing you have ever done?

WORSHIP

Micah 6:8 says *'He has showed you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'*

Praise God for his justice and mercy – and pray that he will help you to become more like him.

WORD

Years ago, when I worked in a research laboratory, there were fairly strict rules designed to ensure safety in the lab. One of the senior lab staff would explain all these safety rules to new staff – 'you must always wear safety goggles and gloves when handling acids' etc.

The problem was, as soon as they had told the new member of staff these things, they immediately went off and ignored the

rules themselves. The rules were there, but no-one actually obeyed them!

But, of course, that sort of thing happens so much in life. Everyone has read about the dangers of smoking, but many people still do it. We seem to be a society which reads things, and then goes off and does whatever we had planned to do anyway.

And it happens with the Bible. How many Christians there must be who have read in the Bible that God wants us to do this, or not do that, and have then gone off and almost without thinking ignored what they have read?

Read Psalm 1

The opening verses describe actions to be avoided. What significance do you see in the progression from *walk* to *stand* to *sit*?

Blessed (verse 1) is not a word which we use very often in ordinary speech. But it could equally well be translated *deeply happy*. Why should avoiding those things in verse 1 make us happy?

In practice are there things that 'sinners' do which we secretly think would make us happy, rather than the reverse?

In contrast to the way of sinners, the psalmist describes the person who *delights* in God's law (verse 2). What is your response to scripture (not what you *believe* about it, but how you *feel* about it)?

Read James 1:19-27

- What things make you angry?
- In view of what James says here, do you think that anger is ever justifiable?
- Why do you think that James puts such an emphasis on our tongues?
- Why should we be 'quick to listen, slow to speak' (verse 19)?
- Have there been times in your life when you have read something in the Bible, but not put it into practice?
- What stopped you?

- What does it mean for us to 'look intently' into God's perfect law?
- How does obeying God's perfect law set you free?
- How can you help a younger Christian to delight in God's word?

Read Matthew 7:24-27

This famous passage comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7.) Look back through those chapters. Which things that Jesus says do you find it hardest to put into practice?

WORK

'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after widows and orphans in their distress ...'

Last week you were encouraged to think of those who might need your help. Have you been able to do anything for them? What still needs to be done?

4. A Welcoming Church?

WELCOME

Where would you most like to visit?

WORSHIP

God welcomes us into his family not because we are special, but because he loves us unconditionally. Spend some time praising God for accepting you and making you part of his family.

WORD

Several years ago whilst on holiday in France I went to the local church. I had been attracted to go because the day before while I was looking round the building, I saw that they had welcome leaflets, with details of that Sunday's services and readings, not only in French, but also in two or three other languages, including English.

As I arrived I was welcomed at the door, given a service book, and found a seat. The service started (though I understood

little of it –my French is not up to that standard!) But what amazed me was the conclusion of the service. As soon as the service was finished, the minister left, and so did the sixty or seventy people in the congregation. Within two minutes I was the only person left in the building!

Another time, on holiday in this country, we again went to the local church. At the end of the service, rather than rushing off, everyone stayed for coffee. There must have been over a hundred people there – but not one of them talked to us. We hung around for ten minutes, then left.

I wouldn't have called either church welcoming! But it was the second one which made me feel most out of place. Here were people who obviously were 'church,' yet they seemed blind to anyone who was not one of them.

Read James 2:1-13

- Do you respond differently to people according to how they are dressed?
- I suspect that the way we dress is less of a divisive issue that it might have been in the past. But are there other things which might lead you to treat some people differently to others?

- Do you show favouritism towards some people at church?
- What is the difference between showing favouritism and having particular friendships?

It seems to me that one of the biggest challenges in being a church which Grows Disciples is building strong friendships with those who are new. I've known cases where a relatively new Christian has drifted away, and no-one in church seems to have noticed.

- What practical things could you do to befriend someone new at Christ Church?
- What would stop you from doing it?

James is particularly strong in what he says about those who insult the poor.

- Are there ways in which we could be guilty of doing this?
- How could oppressing the poor be equated with slandering God's name?

- Verse 10 seems to suggest that all the commandments are of equal importance. Do you think this is what James meant?
- Do you think that some commandments are more important than others?
- How can we avoid thinking of other people's sins as more serious than our own?

Read Micah 6:6-8 again

What might this mean in practice for us today?

WORK

I guess that all of us have people who we usually speak to when we are at church, and others who we never speak to. So – the next time you are at church, speak to someone you've not spoken to before!

5. Sure I believe. So what?

WELCOME

Have you ever got lost on a journey? What happened?

WORSHIP

'God is love' (1 John 4:7 & 16) Praise God for the love he has shown you. Especially thank him for Jesus – 'This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.' (1 John 4:9)

WORD

Several years ago I worked with someone who was a member of the Institute of Accountants (or whatever their professional body is called!). He had passed his exams, he paid his membership fee each year, and so he was entitled to call himself an accountant. Which was strange, really, because he was a vicar! He never had anything to do with accountancy, and hadn't done for several years. I guess that he still had the necessary knowledge to be an accountant if he wanted to – but it didn't really mean anything.

It is a reminder that just having a qualification, on its own, is only the start. You have to put it into practice if it is to mean anything.

Read James 2:14-26

- What is it that makes us Christians? (there's a clue in James 2:1)

- What is the relationship between 'faith' (what we believe) and 'works' (what we do)?

- What sort of deeds should faith produce?

- What would you say to someone who said 'I can't be a Christian because I keep doing all the wrong things'?

- Why is getting the relationship between our faith and works so important for our witness?

James refers to Rahab's faith.

Read Joshua 2

- How did Rahab show her faith? What would have happened to her if she hadn't done so?

James is especially concerned that Christians should meet each other's needs (verse 15).

- Do you think that this is still important? What sort of needs should we be able (and willing) to meet?

Read Acts 4:32-37

The idea of the practical love which James talks of, and which is seen in the sharing of possessions here in the early church can seem quite threatening.

- Why was it so important in this context that the believers were 'one in heart and mind.' (verse 32)?
- What can we do to become more united, not only in what we do, but also in what we believe?

These first Christians, who came from a Jewish background, would have been used to generosity – already in the Old

Testament there was a strong tradition of care for the poor, and the Israelites were to give a tenth of their produce 'to the Levites, the alien, the fatherless and the widow' (Deuteronomy 26:12) The needs then, and among the early Christians, were mainly financial.

- What are the greatest needs Christians have today?
- How can we begin to address these needs as a church?

WORK

'As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.' The American Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that what we need more than anything else is not text books, but text people. That is certainly true for the children at Christ Church – they need to see adults living out their faith with authenticity. But all young Christians need that – to see in older Christians what it means to live the life of faith.

Are there ways in which you can help and encourage each other in your group to be better 'text people'?

6. Wise words?

WELCOME

What is the best piece of advice you have ever been given?

WORSHIP

Have someone read Psalm 19:7-14 slowly.

Thank God for the Bible. Tell him why it is important to you. (If you are stuck for ideas, look at Psalm 119!)

WORD

I guess that for any car owner, one of the most worrying times of year is the M.O.T. You take the car to the garage – it looks O.K., it seems to be running O.K. – but what will the mechanic find when he really examines it? It's so frustrating – a car can look fine on the outside, but still have problems that make it dangerous.

However much we might not like them, car's need to have M.O.T.'s. Merely looking OK on the outside isn't enough. And I think that as Christians, we need to have a sort of spiritual

M.O.T. We might look fine on the outside, be doing all the right things, but is everything really good in our spiritual lives? I wonder – what would we look at to find out about the state of our discipleship, our relationship with the Lord Jesus?

Read Matthew 12:33-37

- How do our words show what our heart is like?
- Why are the things we say (and think) such a good indicator of our relationship with the Lord?

Read James 3:1-12

James returns to a theme he introduced in chapter 1 – the tongue.

- Look through the illustrations which James gives of the power of the tongue. What point is he making?
- Why do you think James calls the tongue a 'world of evil among the parts of the body'?
- Is this a fair assessment of the tongue?
- Do you agree that the tongue is uncontrollable?

- How do our words show the state of our hearts?
- And what can we do about it if we realise that our words show that our hearts are in a bit of a mess?

Read James 3:13-18

- How does James define a wise and understanding person?
- Is this what our society would normally think of as 'wisdom'?
- Do you think what James says about what makes a person wise is a good way of identifying wisdom?
- How does what James says here about wisdom relate to what he has just said about the tongue?

WORK

Are there situations where you find it difficult to show the sort of wisdom which James speaks about here? Pray for one another in those situations.

7. Putting the Lord first?

WELCOME

Which of your five senses is most important to you?

WORSHIP

Psalm 145 is a great Psalm of praise, but also a reminder of who God is. Read the psalm, and then praise God for the things which it tells you about our wonderful Lord.

WORD

I have to admit that I have never been a fan of Big Brother – in fact, I've hardly ever watched it. But what I have seen shows pretty clearly that what most people like to watch is relationships under strain – relationships breaking down, arguments, bitterness and the like. In fact, that seems to be the basic ingredient of all shows of that type. If all we saw was people getting on and being nice to each other, I suspect that ratings would plummet!

But, of course, it would be much more difficult to put a show together where people were nice to each other all the time. It

seems that if you put any random bunch of different people together, problems will soon surface. It's a real life demonstration of what the thinker Blaise Pascal once wrote: 'I set it down as a fact that if each person knew what the other thought of him, there would not be four friends left in the world'!

And sadly, the church isn't immune. I suspect that a Christian 'Big Brother' would result in just the same bickering, unpleasantness, and breakdown in relationships. Why are we like that?

Read Genesis 3

- What things led to the broken relationship between Adam & Eve and God?

- How did that affect Adam and Eve's relationship with each other?

- What does that tell you about why we so easily fall out with others, and why human relationships are so difficult to maintain?

Read James 4:1-17

This passage says a lot about making good, healthy relationships. It does this by pointing out some of the things that were going wrong in Christian communities at that time.

- What issues do the following verses highlight?

v.1

v.11

v.12

Alongside this James talks about our relationship to God.

- What do the following verses have to tell us about God and our relationship with him?

v.4

v.6-10

v.12

- How does James bring these two things together – how does he connect our relationship with other Christians to our relationship with God, especially in prayer?

- What do you think James means when he says that *'friendship with the world is hatred towards God'*? Does he mean that we should cut ourselves off from the world?

James 4:7 says, *'Resist the devil and he will flee from you.'*

- How do we put this into practice? Can we help one another to 'resist the devil'?
- What is the connection between coming near to God and resisting the devil?
- Why can't we draw near to God if we are not resisting the devil?
- Look again at James 4:13-16. Do you think James is saying that it is wrong to make plans for the future? Or that it is wrong to be ambitious?
- In our relationships it is tempting to think that as long as I don't actually harm someone else, it's O.K. How does what James says in 4:17 challenge that?

WORK

James 4 is a reminder that all our relationships are fragile. What can you do to protect and strengthen the relationships in your group?

Do you know of anyone who is going through relationship problems at the moment (maybe within church, within family, within work etc.)? Is there any way in which you could help them?

8. Waiting, Praying, Caring?

WELCOME

There is now little more than a month to go until Christmas (sorry to remind you!) What are you most looking forward to over the next month? And what are you most fearing?

WORSHIP

James 1:17-18 reminds us that *'every good and perfect gift is from above'*. Thank God for the good things that he has given you.

WORD

When I was younger I was a bit of a butterfly. I would take up a new hobby, be really keen for a while, and then lose interest and move on to something else. It wasn't just hobbies – I was the same at work. I'd begin a new project full of enthusiasm, but after a few weeks the novelty would wear off, and I'd want to do something else.

That probably isn't too much of a problem when it comes to hobbies, though it probably does explain why I've never been that good at anything – I just don't stick with it long enough. But it is a problem in the spiritual life. One element of the fruit

of the spirit is patience – and that certainly isn't something that comes naturally.

When you are like that, it is all too easy to give up praying because you don't get an answer quickly enough. And unless you are careful, it is easy to allow other things to swamp the passion you once had for the Lord Jesus.

Read Matthew 6:19-24

- Why can't you serve God and Money?
- What does it mean to *'store up treasure in heaven'*?

Read James 5:1-20

I guess that not many members of your home-group are wicked landowners who get rich by exploiting the people who work for them!

- So does what James says here actually apply to us?
- Are there ways in which our lifestyle comes at the expense of people in other parts of the world, many of whom are our brothers and sisters in Christ?

- Do you store up things for yourself (money, food, material possessions etc.) which could be put to better use?

James goes straight on to talk about patience and hope: the farmer waits and hopes for crops, the Christian waits and hopes for the Lord.

- What is the connection between the greedy landowner and the patient farmer?
- What is it that:
 - makes patience worthwhile?
 - makes patience difficult?
 - makes patience possible?
- How does all this link in with what James was saying in chapter 1?

In verse 9, James returns again to the theme of the tongue. In fact, he devotes about 20% of his letter to teaching about the tongue. List what he says in this chapter

- v.9
- v.12
- v.13

Look back through all that James has said about the tongue in this letter.

- How would you sum it all up (in one sentence if you can manage it!)

At the end of his letter James turns to prayer.

- What can we learn about prayer from the examples he gives?

James says that if someone is sick they should call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them. In this context I think that the elders represent the church as a whole – they pray on behalf of the church, which is what members of our prayer ministry team do Sunday by Sunday.

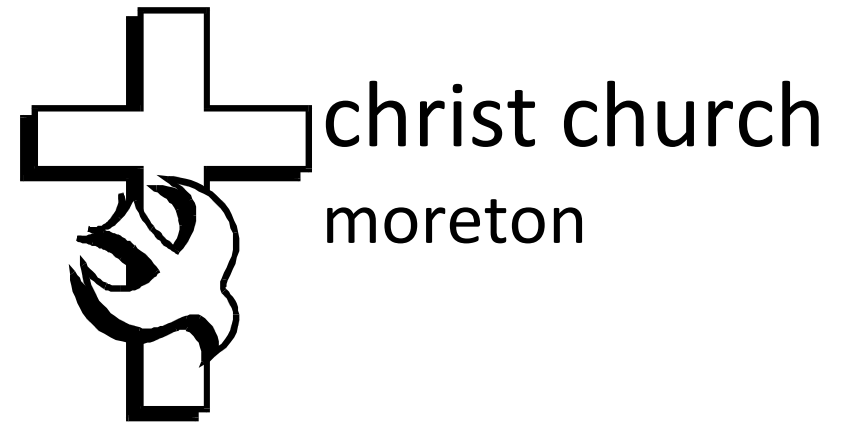
- Have you received prayer like this?
- If you did have a problem, is there anything that would make you reluctant to be prayed for in that way?

WORK

James ends his letter by talking about restoring those who have '*wandered from the truth.*' (verse 19) There are many people in our community who have done just that – in the past they may have been active Christians, but they have drifted away from the church, and as a result their faith has dulled.

Do you know people in that position? If so, what could you do to *'bring them back'*? Are there people you could invite to one of our services or events over Christmas?

And – to come back to the key issue in this series – how can you play your part in helping younger Christians not to wander from the truth?



making disciples
growing disciples
being disciples