

The Uncommon Life

A Small Group Study of the Book of James

Stephen Blandino

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Foreword

In the summer of 2004 God began to deal with my heart about moving our congregation into greater community. That fall we launched our first small groups that we called Connection Groups. We were overjoyed by the number of people that were willing to open their homes and be a part of a small group to get connected to people, God and ministry.

Our motivation to start was simple, we had two objectives:

- Get people connected in meaningful relationships so that ministry could take place.
- Get people connected in an environment where they could “flesh out” their faith.

The results have been amazing. My wife and I led the way in opening our home. We are both preachers’ kids who grew up in church—and yet in over 20 years of married life we had never been together in a small group. It has proven to be one of the greatest joys of our Christian journey as we have shared life with people from a wide range of backgrounds.

Often I have commented to our small group after an inspiring time of discussion and prayer that this has to be the way the New Testament church functioned – with a sense of openness, acceptance and love for each other that can only be found in a small group.

I am convinced that if the body of Christ is going to be what Jesus intended, we must be willing to make the investment in building quality relationships through small groups.

This book is another step in our effort to help people connect to people, God and ministry. As you study the book of James and begin to discuss the practical application of the timeless truths, you will discover an Uncommon Life!

I trust that you will encounter some God moments in your journey!

Darius Johnston
Senior Pastor, Christ Church

Introduction

Life is filled with challenges! Whether at home, on the job, or in our relationships, every individual is faced with the ups and downs of life. While our challenges may be common, the Book of James provides some very “uncommon” wisdom on how to deal with them.

In his letter, James expresses concern for the suffering and difficulties the church is facing. But of equal or greater concern is the penetration of worldly values infiltrating the church. As each chapter unfolds, we discover friendship with the world, faith without action, quarrels and dissension, pride, double-mindedness, and uncontrolled speech as prevalent issues plaguing the church.

But James doesn't just point out the problems – he challenges the believers to submit themselves to God, resist the devil, and pursue a life of purity. Though the problems may be common, James inspires an uncommon response to each of them. In this insightful study of James, you will discover how to develop an uncommon life in six key areas:

- The Uncommon Perspective on Problems
- The Uncommon Truth about Temptation
- The Uncommon Act of Action
- The Uncommon Taming of the Tongue
- The Uncommon Road to Relationships
- The Uncommon Practices of Priorities, Patience, & Prayer

Designed to be used in a small group setting, *The Uncommon Life* will guide you down a path toward spiritual maturity as you cultivate an uncommon approach to living. It will challenge your perspective, accelerate your faith, and deepen your relationships with others. Though written in the first century, the issues in the Book of James are just as common today. So as you study the material with others, may your faith be encouraged and stretched. Above all, may you be equipped to live the uncommon life.

To the Small Group Host

This study is designed to serve as one part of a strategy to connect people with people, with God, and with ministry. The following tips should help you prepare to facilitate a successful group meeting.

First, begin each meeting with time to connect with people. Starting with 20-30 minutes of snacks and soft drinks will provide a great atmosphere for members to visit and get acquainted. In the first session, it is always good to let everyone briefly introduce themselves.

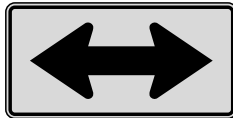
Secondly, spend 45 minutes on the weekly study questions. A good rule of thumb is that no one is required to share but everyone is welcome to share. You will need to be familiar in advance with the questions and be prepared to monitor the time. It is not necessary to ask every question. It is often best to already pick the key questions you feel would be pertinent to the group so that you give priority to them.

Each session includes a three-fold focus to the questions – Connect, Grow, and Serve – to help foster healthy discussion around the study of God’s Word. Connect questions are designed to help group members get to know one another and break the ice relationally. Grow questions are the largest part of each session and take the study of James deeper. Serve questions are designed to help participants apply what they are learning by serving those inside and outside the group.

Finally, be sure to reserve 10-15 minutes for prayer. You can start the first week by asking each person if there is anything they would like the group to pray with them about. In addition, have someone write down the requests to share by e-mail with the group. You can conclude with prayer – everyone praying, one person, or several people.

The discussion of Biblical principles and the prayer time are crucial elements. Several resources are available from Christ Church to coach you on how to conduct good discussion and how to lead an effective prayer time. You can contact Christ Church at 817-292-9292 or connectiongroups@christchurch-ag.org to get these materials.

The Uncommon Perspective on Problems



Problems! Everybody has them! Whether big or small every one of us deals with problems on a daily basis. The bigger the problem, the greater the stress. And when we face problems, our minds are typically consumed with *nothing but the problem*. It's as if everything else disappears as the problem takes center stage. That is how problems are commonly viewed. But therein lies the problem with problems.

The truth about problems is that we often *add* a problem to our problems. As if the cake wasn't big enough already, we finish it off with a layer of problematic icing. So what's the icing on the cake of our problems? It's our *perspective of our problems*. Perspective makes all the difference in how we view and respond to problems and life in general.

Take for example:

When the other person acts that way, he's ugly...

When you do it, it's nerves.

When she's set in her ways, she's obstinate...

When you are, it's just firmness.

When he doesn't like your friends, he's prejudiced...

When you don't like his, you're showing good judgment.

When she tries to be accommodating, she's apple-polishing...

When you do it, you're using tact.

When he takes time to do things, he's dead slow...

When you take ages, you're deliberate.

When she picks flaws, she's cranky...

When you do it, you're discriminating.¹

It's all a matter of perspective. The attitude with which you view your problems often determines the outcome of your situation. While we cannot always control our circumstances, we can always take charge of our attitude toward them. The common response is to blame our problems on someone else. But the uncommon life embraces an entirely different perspective on problems.

Connect

1. Everybody has problems! What's one problem or challenge you've overcome in the last 12 months with the help of God, family, and/or friends?

2. What was your attitude toward this problem when you first encountered it? Did your attitude change over time? If so, how?

Grow

The book of James was one of the earliest written books of the New Testament. Written by James, a respected leader of the church in Jerusalem, it provides practical insight on the Christian life at a time when the believers of the early church were scattered by persecution. Yet what is particularly interesting about this book is the way James starts his letter. Straight out of the gate James tackles the issue of problems. Does he tell the believers that God will comfort them in their problems? No! Does he offer encouraging words to those facing the fear of death? No! Does he speak words of affirmation, hope, or peace? Not one word! Instead, James goes straight to the heart of the issue - *our attitude toward and perspective of our problems*. Particularly challenging are the words of James 1:2-4 from The Message.

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

3. James had an uncommon perspective on problems. What do you think James meant when he said to consider tests and challenges a "sheer gift"? How can a person adopt that kind of perspective toward problems?

4. James says that under pressure “your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors.” When your life gets under pressure, what are some of the “true colors” people see in you?

5. James drives the stake even deeper when he says, “Don’t try to get out of anything prematurely.” What are some of the things we tend to do to get out of problems and difficulties before God has finished His work inside of us?

6. According to James, there is a two-fold purpose for tests and trials. First, to fully develop our character (verse 4). James says that we become “well-developed” and “not deficient in any way” when we are tested. And second, that we receive the crown of life (verse 12). The goal isn’t that you simply survive the test or are able to bear the pain. There’s a much bigger goal. Having this perspective is the foundation to character growth. What is a specific character quality God has developed in you through a test or a trial?

Problems Aren't Just My Problems

In the 1930s American Airways, which later became American Airlines, had a tremendous problem with complaints from passengers about lost luggage. LaMotte Cohn, general manager of the airline at that time, tried to get his station managers to overcome this issue, but he saw little progress. Finally he came upon an idea to help the airline's personnel to see things from their customers' points of view. Cohn asked all of the station managers from across the country to fly to company headquarters for a meeting. Then he made sure that every manager's luggage was lost in transit. Afterward, the airline suddenly made a huge leap of efficiency in that area.²

7. The problem American Airways was facing wasn't just their problem. It was the general manager's problem, the station managers' problem, the luggage handlers' problem, and the customers' problem. The same can be true in our personal lives. When we fail to see our problems from the right perspective, they can result in two things: the problem is prolonged and/or the problem influences others negatively. How have you found this to be true in your life?

Perspective is only one of the keys to handling problems correctly.

Prayer is also important. James 1:5-8 says:

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open. (The Message)

8. What do you think James means when he says, "People who 'worry their prayers' are like wind-whipped waves?"

9. James warns that we must not be double-minded in our prayers. Double-mindedness literally means that we have two sets of loyalties. On one hand we rely on God while on the other we rely on human wisdom. James says that you won't get anything from God if you are "keeping all your options open." How do we keep our options open when we are in prayer? How can double-mindedness affect our perspective on problems?

10. How do the following two uncommon statements cause you to look differently at the role of prayer when we are faced with tests and trials?

- “If God answered all of our prayers, our character would suffer. For in most cases, our prayers center around the removal of the very circumstances He is using to conform us to His image.”³ (*Author and Pastor Andy Stanley*)
- “When we pray ourselves out of adversity, we are praying ourselves out of God's gym. God wants to develop some things in our life because He knows that down the road we are going to need these things to survive. Don't so quickly pray yourself out of adversity. It may be God's workshop to build into you something that you will need later on.”⁴ (*Sermon from Richard Pfeil*)

The Poor and the Prosperous

After a challenging look at problems and the importance of perspective and prayer, James suddenly shift gears and addresses the poor and the prosperous. While commentators have varying opinions on why James suddenly raises these issues, consider this:

- The Poor – Perhaps one of the most difficult trials is that of being in need of material provision. The poor face challenges that are overwhelming and they can make our problems pale in comparison. In the midst of such difficulty, James may be encouraging believers to put their problems in perspective and to shift our focus off ourselves and onto those in greater need.
- The Prosperous – When a person is blessed with material wealth, it can be tempting to lean on resources as the way to solve all of our problems. But prosperity is no replacement for character development. James is clear that material possessions will fade away and that our trust must be in the Lord.

11. Perspective and prayer are powerful ingredients to navigating our problems. But James raises a third ingredient – Perseverance. It's been said that you can live through hell if you know it's only temporary. James 1:12 says, *"Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life"* (The Message). How has perseverance been the break-through ingredient when facing problems in your life?

Serve

12. What encouragement and insights do the following passages give us regarding how we can persevere?
- Joshua 1:8-9
 - Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
 - Romans 5:1-5
 - Hebrews 12:1-3
13. Although trials develop our character, it's nice to have other people encourage us along the way. How can you provide perspective, offer prayer, or encourage perseverance to someone who is going through a trial?
14. What tests or trials are you currently facing? What would be an "uncommon" response to those tests and trials? How can our small group pray for you?