

Semicontinuous  
**Song 2:8–13**  
**Ps. 45:1–2, 6–9**  
Complementary  
**Deut. 4:1–2, 6–9**  
**Ps. 15**  
**Jas. 1:17–27**  
**Mark 7:1–8, 14–15,**  
**21–23**

# Faith Works

**Goal for the Session** Adults will articulate personal and communal works that put faith into practice in light of the witness of James.

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on James 1:17–27

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Aaron L. Utti

For a covenant community, which is not immune to heated disputes, James urges his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak. James undoubtedly sat through assemblies where contention fractured the community. He observed that human anger will not produce results that make things right. James is intense, using acid rhetoric: “rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,” he admonishes (v. 21). On the other hand, he says, listening and being listened to open the door to the righteousness of God for the community.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Haruko Nawata Ward

In Greek philosophy, every being has its origin in the highest Being. This Being is also named the Source, Life, Light, Good, Truth, and Idea. Each being is placed in the hierarchy of beings, as on a ladder. Each receives energy from the Source above. If the being is closer to the top of the ladder, it receives and reflects brighter light; if the being ranks toward the bottom, it receives lesser light and stays shadowy. Calling the Christian God “Father of lights” (v. 17), the writer of James shows that every life-giving gift to Christians also comes from their Source. However, by stating “there is no variation or shadow due to change,” the writer departs from Greek cosmology. In the Christian universe, every Christian receives this gift equally and not according to his or her rank in the hierarchy. The supreme gift that Christians receive is “birth by the word of truth” (v. 18).

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” by Archie Smith Jr.

James calls us to be responsible, taking seriously our emotional lives, our religious faith, and our behavior. We can envision ourselves as early signs of God’s new creation. We can begin by embracing the whole of ourselves and taking responsibility for our constructive and destructive potentials. Living this way can increase our critical discernment. It can foster the development of persons and communities. Such living, when joined by the faithfulness of many others, can become a strong current that helps to transform the world.

#### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Peter Rhea Jones

The reference to new birth signals a critical intention of a purposive God. One may draw this out in terms of a theology and ethic of divine giving (John 3:16), giving being at the heart of the universe. Generosity grounded in the character of God and embodied in the mission of Jesus can unfold as an influential model of the Divine. To be generous is consonant with the nature of God. God comes through as reliable as well (v. 17c), even from a cosmic perspective.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**James 1:17–27**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults will recognize, in others if not themselves, when a gap exists between words and actions. That gap can be especially troublesome for persons and communities of faith when what is confessed does not match up with what is enacted. Popular phrases have evolved that express the need to “walk the talk” or “be the change you wish to see.” Today’s focus scripture offers assertions about the nature of both God and bonafide religion that address that gap and ways to overcome it. This passage in James may be challenging to adults nurtured in theologies that rule out or minimize the necessity of works for faith.

*God, guide my preparations for this class and help me lead it. Amen.*

**YOU WILL NEED**

- newsprint
- marker
- Bibles
- paper
- pens
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 6, 2015

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens
- option 2: paper, pens
- option 3: large banner-size paper, markers, magazines with pictures, glue sticks, scissors

Ever since Luther scorned the letter of James as “an epistle of straw,” Protestants have tended to view it with suspicion. Yet even Luther understood the necessity of expressing the gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in love.

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session,* post a newsprint sheet and place a marker nearby.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any guests or newcomers.

Have participants think about a belief they have held that compelled them to do something they would not normally do. After a minute, have participants turn to the person next to them and tell their story briefly and then hear their neighbor’s story.

Call the whole group back together and ask for a few volunteers to summarize any dramatic examples they heard. Relate that today’s session focuses on faith as both belief and action.

Offer these or similar words for an opening prayer:

*We thank you, God, for the gift of bringing us together in your presence for the sake of deepening our faith. In Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

Ask participants to relate what they know of the epistle, or letter, to James. Note that tradition attributes authorship of the epistle to James the brother of Jesus, who was a leader in the early Jerusalem church (see Acts 15 and 21 for background on this) until his martyrdom in or near 62 CE. Reference the material in the sidebar as further background on how the church has sometimes viewed this letter and its theology. If participants question why Luther took this view, briefly explain that it is over James’ insistence on the importance of works for faith. In Luther’s time, part of the church had abused this notion and persuaded Christians to give to the church in order to ensure their salvation. Luther preached salvation by faith alone. Invite participants to keep that theme in mind as they work their way through the focus scripture.

Form small groups of three or four and give each group a piece of paper and pen. Have them read in silence or aloud James 1:17–27. Then have them go back through the Scripture just read and compile a list of all the actions James says Christians should do. After a few minutes, have groups call out the actions and write them on the board or newsprint so that all can see them.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on James 1:17–27), and read the “What?” excerpt. Allow the small groups a little time to pretend they are the first communities reading this letter. Have them think about stories from Jesus’ life they have heard that confirm some of the actions mentioned here. For example, in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12) Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek . . .” After a few minutes have each group tell one thing they mentioned.

Have a volunteer read the “Where?” excerpt. Again, focusing on the original group of hearers, discuss the following questions:

- ✧ As Christian readers of these verses, how is the equality between Christians both a blessing and a responsibility?
- ✧ What is tempting about a faith that does not demand works?

Read James 1:26–27 aloud. Working in small groups, have each group agree on one or two of all the actions listed that are most important for Christians to follow in their context. Have them prepare a brief paraphrase of the focus scripture they might write to Christians today. After a few minutes, allow each group to tell their answer and read their paraphrase.

To transition to Responding, have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt aloud to the group. Ask:

- ✧ What are examples of Christian communities today whose actions are creating strong currents that help transform the world?

EASY  
PREP

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. **Doers of the Word** Putting faith into practice is not just a discipline suggested by James, but a summons to translate the whole of biblical faith into works that show what we really believe. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Do-Worders) and pens. Give participants time to read it over. Have adults fill in the blanks. Form pairs or return to the small groups used in Exploring to compare and contrast the responses they have written. Challenge participants to identify one or two of their favorite Bible verses the following week, and then do the same reflective exercise with them in terms of ways they practice that word—and new ways they might consider.

If you choose option 3, make arrangements to leave the mural up so additional elements can be added next session. You might also check with your pastor to arrange to display the mural for the whole church to see.

- 2. Taking Inventory** The discipline of “doing the word” begins with personal reflection on the ways we currently render our faith into action, as well as identifying areas where our faith may need greater embodiment. Distribute paper and pens. Invite participants to reflect on and write down the actions by which they live out their faith. Along with that, encourage participants to identify one or two elements of their faith that seem to be devoid or lacking in action. Encourage adults in the coming week to work at those one or two elements of faith by considering and taking action to give it expression.
- 3. Faith at Work Mural** It is important to recognize and celebrate ways in which the church translates the words of our faith into concrete actions of mission, compassion, and evangelism. Invite the participants to work together and create a mural that displays ways in which your congregation currently embodies the words of our faith in action. Show participants the materials available for making the mural. Post the mural. Encourage adults in the coming week to identify and bring back one more symbol or expression of your congregation’s faith works to add to the mural next session.

## CLOSING

Gather the adults in a circle. Invite participants to offer words or phrases that summarize the message of today’s focus scripture for them. Note that today is the final session in this quarter, and that a new quarter of materials begins next Sunday. Ask adults to identify matters of concern, or celebration, that might provide evaluation not just of the quarter just past, but ideas for the quarter ahead. Make note of any and all ideas shared. If you will not be leading the next quarter or session, pass the information along to the next leader as well as to the people responsible for planning adult education in your congregation. Thank adults for their participation.

Close by joining hands and uniting in the Lord’s Prayer.

Offer the group the commission that comes from James:

*Let us go and be doers of the word!*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 6, 2015 or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

## Focus on James 1:17–27

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For a covenant community, which is not immune to heated disputes, James urges his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak. James undoubtedly sat through assemblies where contention fractured the community. He observed that human anger will not produce results that make things right. James is intense, using acid rhetoric: “rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,” he admonishes (v. 21). On the other hand, he says, listening and being listened to open the door to the righteousness of God for the community.

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## Do-Worders

You've probably heard the expression "do-gooder." Though it has come to take on a pejorative meaning, take a closer look at what that expression literally means: doing good.

The epistle of James has its own variation on do-gooder: "be doers of the word, and not hearers only." In other words, be a "do-worder." Don't just hear the word on Sunday, or through the week in devotional encounters. James calls upon individuals and communities of faith to be "do-worders," folks who put into practice the words of our faith.

Take a look at the following familiar "words" that come to us in Scripture. In the space below each, write down ways that word is practiced—or might be done in new ways—in your life and by your congregation.

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another. (Romans 13:8)*

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*So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. (Matthew 6:34)*

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*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)*

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*But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:43–44)*

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*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. (2 Corinthians 5:16)*

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*“Be doers of the word,  
and not hearers only.”*