
James: The Heart of Division in the Church

James 5:7-20 Patience and Repentance in Trials

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Introduction

Review: The Heart of Division in the Church

We have come to the last week in our series on the book of James. Since it has been 5 weeks since we began I wanted to provide a brief review.

Week 1, James 1: 1-27 is an introduction of his letter to primarily Jewish believers, near Jerusalem, now being scattered through economic and social stress and persecution. In his introduction James brings up most of the topics he intends to address through his letter, but the key in this introduction was asking and depending on God for wisdom whenever believers face trials of many kinds. I titled this introduction, Joy and Wisdom in Trials.

The second week we looked at James 2: 1-26; I titled this chapter Testing Through Generosity. In the midst of economic hardship and social persecution, James called on his audience to be generous. There were many in the church with physical needs that were in fact being denied, and those who had wealth were being favored and shown partiality in the church community. James told his readers that such partiality was sin.

In James 3:1-4:12; we can see how James focused on Testing Through the Tongue. Verses on the tongue comprise nearly one third of the total verses in the letter. Clearly addressing sin through the tongue was important to James, and because of the partiality in the church there was verbal murder taking place among the believers due to envy and jealousy and selfish ambition. What was coming out of their mouths was merely a reflection of what was hidden in their hearts.

In James 4:13-5:6; we looked at Testing Through Wealth. There was a clear separation between those with financial resources and those without. Those without resources were envious and jealous of their wealthier brothers, and yet the wealthy were failing to take care of their brothers and sisters in need. They were conducting business in a worldly way, depending on their own resources instead of recognizing their need to be fully dependant on God. The rich were trusting in riches instead of God's sovereignty, a lifestyle that James warned would ultimately lead down a path of judgment before God.

Our text this week as we conclude this series on James is James 5:7-20. I have titled this sermon, Patience and Repentance in Trials. Open your Bibles to James 5, beginning at verse 7;

Patience in Trials (v. 7-12)

Patient Obedience (v. 7-8)

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

James uses Deuteronomy as a reference when he mentions early and late rains, a phrase his listeners would be familiar with. Deut. 11:13-17 reads; “*And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, 14 he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. 15 And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. 16 Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; 17 then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the Lord is giving you.*”

James is using this Deuteronomy passage in the context of obedience to the law and subsequent blessings on the land. What is vital to see here is that the Promised Land was not flush with blessings because of anything the inhabitants did or didn't do, but this was God's land to tend, take care of, and bless. This land was a blessing solely because of God's work, and his sovereignty. All the Israelites had to do was to love God and serve and obey him with all of their heart. We all know how well that worked out for the Israelites, but there was always an anticipation of the future, and God's promise and blessing of the land no matter what their circumstances.

James has had patience in mind throughout the whole letter of James. He desires that his readers look beyond the trials in this life and look forward to the life to come when we are with our savior in eternity. He has this in mind when he encourages the reader to be patient in the midst of trials and remain fixed and steadfast with their hearts and minds on Christ. Wisdom in the middle of remaining steadfast has been a consistent heartbeat of the letter from James' opening words.

Look at the last sentence in this section, and the focus that James wants us to see...verse 8. *You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*

James wants them to anticipate and focus on the future, not their current trials. Focusing on future rewards and judgment helps James' audience have the patience and perseverance they need in their current trials. But like verse 2:1, to do this they are to, “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” So, the patience and strength in trials comes solely from Christ and our focus and dependence on him alone. The wisdom we need comes from God alone through faith, and through wisdom comes patience. Like the Israelite farmer of the Old Testament, patience in farming came because they were dependant on God's mighty provision from the land, and not their own skill and strength. Obedience through God's word in the

middle of trials has been a key element from the beginning of James, just like God expected the Israelites to receive the blessings of the Promised Land through faithful patience and obedience to God, their provider.

A Patient Tongue (v. 9)

Part of that obedience in the midst of trials is keeping oneself free from sins of the mouth. James already spent a large part of his letter dealing with sins of the tongue, and how the tongue impacts community life. He mentions sinning with our tongues in his introduction, and now he touches on it again in his concluding exhortation. Here is what James 5:9 says,

9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

Recall what James wrote earlier in chapter 4:11-12;

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 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.

The subject of the tongue was important to James because he dedicated a third of the book to the subject of the tongue. So, he reminds the listener that it is not only what comes out of your mouth that is damaging to yourself and others, but also what is in your heart that is important. Here he reminds his audience that we are not to judge others, for there will be judgment, but it will be from the one true Judge. In this conclusion, James not only reminds us that there one lawgiver and judge, but most importantly, that he is standing at the door. In other words, the eschatological end is near. We are in the last age before Christ returns, and just as he wants us to look forward to the Age to Come, as we walk through our trials, we also need to live as ones soon to be judged and accountable for every word we say.

James' focus in the conclusion to his letter is the life to come, and therefore we are encouraged to look forward in order to draw strength for the trials we face in the present. To further encourage our patience in affliction, and the reality of future judgment, he reached back into the past for examples of the prophets who also looked and lived "forward" (in faith) to draw strength, courage, and wisdom for the present.

Let's read verses 10 & 11;

Patient Examples (v. 10-11)

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (11.) Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

James wants us to consider the prophets as examples of patience and faith. Later he uses Elijah as an example of a righteous man of prayer, just as he used Abraham as

an example of a lifestyle of faith. Now he specifically mentions Job in the same passage as the prophets, even though Job was not technically a prophet. James also wants the reader to see how the Lord had a purpose for Job's trials, and how, according to James, the Lord was compassionate and merciful to Job.

We often hear of the "patience" of Job, and clearly a primarily Jewish community would know well of the trials of Job. We all know that Job was a clear example of patience, even though he was not perfect in his life before God. But just as important in the story of Job is God's sovereignty over Job's life and circumstances. James wants the reader to understand God's sovereignty in the midst of trials and temptations, even as we look to God and depend on him for our patience in the hardships that God allows us to experience under his sovereign hand. James also does not want us to forget the patience and mercy of God in our trials. Listen to what happened to Job, in Job 42:10;

Job 42:10; And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

James may also have in mind Psalms 103 and 111;

Psa. 103:6, 8; The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Psa. 111:4; He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and merciful.

There is never the guarantee that God will restore our fortunes like he did in the story of Job, or give us any wealth at all, but scripture is clear that in God's sovereignty over our trials, God will always be merciful and compassionate, even when we don't fully understand our own circumstances.

Arrogant Oaths (v. 12)

One of the standard concluding matters in a Greek letter was the issue of oaths.

Let's read verse 12;

12 But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

"The summary is finished. In a Greek letter one would now expect an oath certifying that what had been said in the letter was true. Instead James quotes Jesus (Mt. 5:33-37) and argues that Christians ought not to take oaths. It is not that the oath is in itself wrong, but that it divides speech into two levels. Some statements are sworn to and thus must be true, while others are just normal speech and may not be. Jesus said that people would be judged for every word (Mt. 12:36). All words are to be true.

Everything is to be open and honest. Since God hears all words, it should be for the Christian as if all statements were an oath sworn before God.”¹

With all of the work that James provided us on the trials of the tongue and the potential destruction of the tongue, as believers we need to be aware of our words and what they mean. We need to remember that what we say, and how we act reflects on who we are in Christ. In the world, the honesty and validity of our speech is often the only thing someone may remember about our claims concerning Christ. Do not swear, merely keep your word, and have Christ in mind as you do this.

Prayer for Repentance (v. 13-18)

James has built his letter to this last concluding section of the book of James. After all that James has addressed in his letter, it really comes down to an exhortation to live a life of repentance and righteousness before the face of God. Verse 13;

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

“James divides the evil a person may experience into two categories. The first includes the term ‘suffer’ and means those unpleasant experiences that come from outside; either the hardships experienced in spreading the gospel, or persecution by evil people. These are what James has been discussing under the heading of ‘tests’ or ‘trials’ and has concluded in 5:7–11. Those suffering in this way should pray - not necessarily for deliverance, but for the ability to endure patiently. Those who are having a good life should also pray, but their prayer should be *songs of praise*. This leaves the second group of people experiencing evil, the sick.”²

We have already recognized in previous sermons that not all of James listeners are experiencing trials the same way. And this is the reality of life. Trials come and go at various intensities and frequencies. Therefore we are bound to have a variety of responses that are godly, typically prayer and praise. But why is sickness singled out in this paragraph?

Let’s read verses 14 and 15:

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

¹D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jas 5:12.

²D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Jas 5:13.

If you remember, not everyone was suffering in the same way, nor was the sin of partiality effecting everyone at the same level of intensity, so these exhortations make sense if we connect all that has been written up to this point in James. But the sick - what is happening with the sick in James?

James touched on sickness in verses two and three of this chapter: *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.*

Even in this word picture from the Old Testament James seems to pinpoint a picture of physical illness and decay. James is tying this particular illness with sin, but the sick can be forgiven of their sins, and therefore healed physically and spiritually. When a person is sick because of God's chastening through illness, it vital to call upon the elders of the church to pray through faith that their sins may be forgiven and their physical body healed. James may have Isaiah 33:22 and 24 in mind here. It reads, *For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us. 24 And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick"; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.*

But to have the best understanding of what James is thinking we need to consider the remaining section of James' letter as it refers to sin, sickness, and the example of Elijah. James is considering the elder's role of authority in the church, and their life of righteousness as he explains the prayer of righteousness and faith in this conclusion. Let's continue to verse 18:

16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

The key to understanding this text is 1 Kings 17-18. I do want to thank Pastor Russ and Pastor Chad for their thought, work, and input into this passage. This is a difficult passage and one that is often misused and misinterpreted. The key to properly understanding what James is teaching here is to carefully look at the life of Elijah. The choice of Elijah is not accidental, because Elijah's redemptive-historical context mirrors that of James' audience.

It might be helpful to consider the chiasm that Russ helped me see in 1 Kings 17-18:

The Drought and Supernatural Provision (17:1-7) Because of the sin of King Ahab and subsequent chastening of the Israelites God tells Elijah that he is going to cause a draught for a number of years, but that God will provide for Elijah during this difficult time. God provides for Elijah initially through a brook and ravens which bring him food.

The Widow and Supernatural Life (17:8-24) Eventually the brook dries, and the Lord send Elijah into the town of Zarepath, where God has commanded a widow to care for Elijah. The Lord supernaturally provides for

Elijah and the widow's family with her last bit of flour and oil. The flour and oil last until the Lord sends rain again upon the earth. After Elijah was with the widow for some time her son became ill and died. Elijah cries out to God in prayer and the widow's son is healed.

The Prophet and Righteous Courage (18:1-19) Elijah confronts King Ahab, through Obadiah, a fearful follower of the LORD. Elijah challenges Ahab and the 450 false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

The Idolaters and Supernatural Fire (18:20-40) All of the people of Israel gather at Mt. Carmel where God supernaturally displays his reality to everyone through wicking up of Elijah's sacrifice. He then kills all 450 false prophets.

The Rain and Righteous Prayer (18:41-46) Elijah the confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal, and the prophets were slain, went up on Mt. Carmel, sat down with his head between his knees and prayed to the LORD, and God provided rain for the land again.

Just like the example of Abraham that James used earlier in his letter, it was Abraham's whole life that the listeners would have thought about as they considered his model of true faith. So too with Elijah, James' listeners would have considered Elijah's whole life and his relationship with God as the key to his vital communication with God through prayer.

There is a pattern that emerges from the 1 Kings text where Elijah is in constant and direct communication with God. Elijah is "crying out" to the LORD, and the LORD is listening although prayer is not always specifically mentioned. Elijah is much like Moses in his regular and clear communication with God. Elijah "calls on the name of the LORD", and "stands before the LORD." Thus, Elijah is an eschatological type of the righteous man whose praying 'avails much', he is an example or "type" of The One who would come later – the ultimate Righteous Man.

James pulls Elijah into his sermon because he sees the church, especially the elders of the church, following the same pattern of Elijah. Not only is earnest prayer characteristic of the faith of those who are the first fruits of creation, but the earnest praying is due to the sin of God's people, just as in Elijah's day. What really jumped out at me was the parallel between "The one who is sick" and who "committed sins" in James chapter 5 and the sickness of the Zarepath child of 1 Kings 17. You can also draw a parallel between the drought in 1 Kings 18, and the sickness that is experienced in James 5, just as Elijah's prayer brings rain as a picture of healing and restoration in the midst of sin, so too does rain in James's letter create a picture of healing and forgiveness to the wayward believer.

There is healing, forgiveness and salvation in the prayer of the 'righteous man' because Christ himself has come bringing healing, forgiveness and salvation (Isaiah 61). James is not calling on the listeners to aspire to be like Elijah; rather, the listen-

ers are to 'be' or to 'walk' in the same steps as Elijah...walking the life of faith in anticipation of a future hope, waiting patiently for the Lord...because, the Judge who stands at the door is near. Our ultimate hope in the midst of trials is here. Jesus is standing at the door ready to reward and judge. This present reality and future focus brings patience and better yet healing, forgiveness and salvation.

Consider the life of Elijah in 1 Kings 17-18. Elijah is provided for, protected, preaches, is persecuted and prays in the midst of Israel's and the Widow's chastening. There is judgment for Israel's idolatry, potential adultery, and Obadiah's fear of the Nation's leadership. Elijah's powerful praying and constant communication with God is the one clear connection that runs through each one of these circumstances in 1 Kings. Therefore Elijah is a clear example of a righteous man who is constantly communicating with God with and through his whole life in the middle of persecution, sin and judgment.

Elijah is actually a "type" (or like Christ) as one who deals with judgment and mediates chastening. Christ himself is the one greater than Elijah who was provided for by God, raises the dead, and brings down the fire of the Spirit, and mightily prays for his wayward children. Elders are the new covenant expression of Elijah and Christ; The Elders are to serve, protect, preach, provide and pray over God's wayward children. We are all to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another so that we are clear of chastening through illness. But according to James, if there is sickness that is a direct chastening by God due to sin, the elders of the church are to pray a prayer of faith and anoint with oil.

As a side note, it is not clear whether oil is directly used for medicinal purposes by the elders, or if it was merely symbolic of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the sinning believer. In either case, it is not meant to be the focus of the passage.

So you see that what James has been building and leading up to in his letter, takes place in the midst of persecution, financial hardship, socio-economic favoritism, internal strife, anger, jealousy, and envy. James has said from the beginning of his letter that the church needs to call on God for wisdom in the midst of these trials of various kinds, and endure the trials patiently, enduring steadfastly, keeping their eyes focused on the future culmination of Christ's return and judgment. Now we see there is a severe illness caused from sin in at least one person in the church James is writing to and now like Elijah prayed for the Widow's ill son, the sick person is to call on the elders in the church to have the elders intercede with a prayer of faith and forgiveness to receive restoration and healing, and perhaps even true salvation.

James says that each believer is to confess their sin to one another and prayer for one another, but this person is specifically ill due to living in sin. Thus, the importance of calling on the elders for effectual prayer in the midst of difficult circumstances, like Elijah, the sick person James is referring to is probably a current leader or aspiring leader (teacher) in the church. This one who has sinned and wandered from the faith encouraged or facilitated the strife and internal struggles that took place in the church, and is now in the middle of God's chastening through physical illness.

Let's finish the text beginning at verse 19:

The Ultimate Purpose (v. 19-20)

19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The ultimate point of James is restoration in the midst of persecution, trials, and sin. One or more persons have been living in sin and causing strife in the church through favoritism, faulty teaching, sinful words, and restricting the means of helping the needy in the church. Perhaps this person was even charge of the benevolent fund. But now as his sin has caused sickness, James instructs him to call on the elders of the church to pray for the forgiveness of his sin as well as the healing of his physical illness. God's chastening and subsequent healing and forgiveness of sin will save the wandering sinner from death. Healing, forgiveness, and salvation are vitally intertwined in the prayer of the righteous man. There is a clear gospel orientation in the "prayer of the righteous man".

The point in James 5 is that Elijah models effectual fervent prayer as a holder of faith (2:1), and one who waits patiently for the coming of the Lord. A "righteous" man will pray for restoration and salvation through faith, even in the context of chastening. The one who is sick due to chastening should call on the elders to pray over them with and in faith (as righteous men, and first fruits of creation) because there is sin involved.

Conclusion

Pray for one another and confess your sins to one another so that you may be healed. God can and does heal the sick, but as we pray we need to recognize that it is God alone who decides what is best for his children and whether or not he will heal the sick person. We are not God, and we are to humbly appeal to God and his will in our trials that may involve physical illness.

If you suspect an illness is due to the direct chastening of God because of sin in your life, call on the elders to hear your confession of sin, and pray a prayer of healing for your soul and body. This is James' expectation and exhortation.

Ask God for wisdom and patience in your trials of many kinds. God will provide wisdom as you "hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory". The same Lord who provides wisdom will also, in his mercy and graciousness, provide patience.

Let us live a life of righteousness like Elijah, a life of constant communication and dependence on God in the midst of our trials. Even if there is sin, chastening, hardship and rebellion against God, we need to believe that God will sustain us and provide for us as we live righteously in a sinful world.

And lastly, we need to be aware of those around us who have wandered away from the truth. We need to love and pray for them, open our mouths, and seek to do our part in saving their souls from death. Restoration, healing, and salvation are God's ultimate goal, and James desired the same for those who were wandering from the

truth in the churches he was writing to. How can our focus be any less in our community?

Let's pray...



Title

Text

Speaker

The Chapel Pulpit • <date> Sunday Morning

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Introduction

Heading

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Heading

Conclusion