

Scripture Reading: James 5:13-20 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. ¹⁴Is 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; ¹⁵and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. ¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

¹⁹My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. During the last four months, I have been presenting a series of sermons going through my favorite book of the New Testament – the Epistle of James. Many people love this book because it has a lot of practical things to say about living the Christian life. Today: we have come to the end of the book. The Scripture Reading that we listened to a moment ago in James chapter 5 is the last portion of this book.

Before I begin to comment on today's scripture, I would like to review the highlights of the Epistle of James as a whole. In fact, I'm going to spend about half of today's sermon reviewing the main lessons we have learned in this book. And it is interesting to me that today's Scripture Reading began with something that parallels what we read at the very beginning of the epistle: an admonition to pray in the midst of trials and to pray in faith.

The first admonition in this book is in James 1:2-3 – "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." Encountering trials should actually be welcomed by us, because, if we respond appropriately, trials will test our faith and they produce endurance, which in turn produces maturity, says verse 4. Verse 5 then says that if you are lacking the wisdom to respond properly, you should ask God for it – you should pray. But, says verse 6, you must ask in faith. That parallels what James says in chapter 5.

In James 1:9-11, we have a brief discussion on the rich and the poor, which is a topic we looked at in my message last week. The rich should remember that life and wealth will fade away, so the rich ought to be humble before God. They should not regard themselves as great but should recognize that they are mere mortals who have limited time here on earth. On the other hand, those Christians who are materially poor are encouraged to know that God values them and has put them in a high position as precious children of God.

Chapter 1 continues with a discussion of temptation, lust, sin, and death. James 1:13-14 – "¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. ¹⁴But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust." Don't blame God for temptation. The danger lies in your heart: the lust is in your heart. When you face temptation, it's the lust inside you that will lead you astray – if you let it. Verse 15 – "¹⁵Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." That's the process: if you let yourself be attracted by that temptation, it will cause the lust in your heart to conceive, then that gives birth to sin, and then continuing in sin leads eventually to death – eternal death and separation from God. *But, you don't have to let sin follow this course in your life* – at a number of points during this process, you can halt it. You can refuse to let lust conceive by just turning away from temptation and not indulging it. Or, if you do sin, you can halt the process by quickly realizing your fault and repenting of the sin – turning from the sin –

and seeking God's forgiveness. He is eager to forgive, as many verses in the Old and New Testaments say repeatedly. I found these verses here to be extremely helpful to me as a young man facing temptations – at several points in this process, I have an opportunity to just refuse to move further with the lust or with the sinful actions, to just refuse to not indulge it anymore and turn away from it.

James 1:21-22 goes on to tell us another crucial principle for life – “²¹Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” Set aside all filthiness in your life ... and in humility receive the Word of God, implanted in your heart. And prove to be a doer of the Word and not merely a hearer. That means: put into practice what you hear from God's Word. Don't merely hear it spoken and don't merely read it on the page and then forget about it. If you don't put God's words into practice in your life, you aren't being a proper Christian disciple and you are just a hearer. Don't delude yourself: merely coming to church to hear the word won't save you. Trusting God and putting His word into practice is what will save your soul.

Moving on to chapter 2, the chapter begins with an exhortation not to show favoritism to people at church. It is all too easy for us to treat rich people with more attention and more respect than we do toward poor people, but we are told we should not have such attitudes and actions. We are each equal before God.

The second half of chapter 2 deals with the sometimes confusing issue of faith and works and their relation to each other and the role they play in our salvation. James 2:14-16 “¹⁴What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?”

What use is that kind of faith? Pious words, but no helpful action? When I gave my message on this passage a couple months ago, I pointed out that true faith manifests itself by actions. We are not saved by works, as numerous passages in the Bible affirm, but a faith that fails to manifest itself in action is not a saving faith. True faith acts – that's the lesson I left you with a couple months ago.

Chapter 3 deals with a very troublesome character. This troublesome character is a small guy, but he can be incredibly destructive. I am talking about a troublesome part of our body: the tongue. Our speech can get us into all kinds of trouble. James begins his discussion with a focus on teachers. James 3:1 – “¹Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” Teachers are going to have a stricter judgment in the end. Wow. It is a serious thing to be a teacher in the church, something I remind myself often. Teachers speak a lot, and so, unfortunately, they have more opportunities to perhaps go astray in what they say. They have to be very careful. They have to be very careful in what they teach from the Scriptures and they have to be very careful in their conversations outside the teaching venue.

Verse 1 is an introduction to the rest of the chapter, which is about how all of us should be careful in how we speak. How many times have each of us said careless, hurtful words to other people? To family members, to colleagues, to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Verse 5 – “⁵So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!” This little tongue can do so much damage.

As I said last week and as we read about in the remainder of chapter 3 and into chapter 4, what comes out of our mouth is an indication of what is in our heart. I told you in previous messages that

we have a heart problem. If you fill your heart with good, godly thoughts, then that will come out in your speech. But if you fill your heart with ugly thoughts, that also comes out in your speech – how often have each of us experienced that, both as the speaker and as the recipient of hurtful speech?

James 3:14 says you may have jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart. James 4:1 says – “¹What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?” The source of conflicts at church is oftentimes the pleasures and even the lusts that we have in our heart (says verse 2).

That is not the way Christians should act, so James gives his audience a really harsh criticism. Verse 4 – “⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” They are guilty of spiritual adultery, because they are not faithful to their God and to the Lord Jesus Christ.

James exhorts us not to follow that path and then he tells us what to pursue instead – “⁶But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble’.” Our lives and our hearts should be filled not with pride but with humility. This a great grace, a free gift, and if you will accept it, God will give you the power to work out this grace in your life. Humility is the path to effective Christian living and harmonious relationships at church and with your fellow human beings, as well. And this is what will lead to personal benefits for yourself. Verse 10 – “¹⁰Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” If you cultivate this virtue of humility in your life, your relationship with God and with your fellow Christians will be more peaceful.

James 4:7-10 gives a series of short, crucially important exhortations. This is the way to peace with God, peace with your fellow Christians, and successful Christian discipleship.

Submit therefore to God.

Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, you sinners.

Purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Be miserable and mourn and weep.

Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

I told you in a previous message that having a posture of humility is crucial to develop in your life. This will lead to benefits for yourself and for relationships at church. If we live by this principle, as chapters 4 and 5 show us, we won’t be unfairly criticizing our brothers and sisters and we will live lives humbly recognizing God’s sovereignty over our lives.

In James 5:7-8, he exhorts us to be patient and to strengthen our hearts. Spiritual growth takes time, and we must be diligent to nurture this. In verse 12, we are told to be true to our word. And that is where I ended my message last week.

Let us now look in detail at today’s passage in the second half of chapter 5. James 5:13-14 – “¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. ¹⁴Is 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.” At some point in our lives, each of us will experience suffering. Each of us will also enjoy times of cheerfulness. An appropriate response to cheerfulness is to sing praises to our Lord. An appropriate response to suffering is not complaining or hopelessness – an appropriate response is prayer.

Despite the pain of suffering, we do not lose hope, for God is still sovereign over everything. As we saw last week with the experience of the man named Job and with the experience of the Old Testament prophets (which James mentions in verses 10-11), we do not lose hope but instead we remain faithful, enduring the suffering. And in doing that, not only is there a spiritual reward, but our faithfulness can be a positive witness that honors God. Life in this fallen world does sometimes involve suffering. We are called on to remain faithful, as the Old Testament prophets did.

Pray. I am reminded of Philippians 4:6-7, which happens to be from my second-favorite book of the New Testament. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Do not be anxious. Let your requests be made known to God. Then peace will come. As I have meditated on these verses over the years, the picture I get is that I pray to the Lord and I give him my requests – remembering to be thankful for past blessings – and then: I leave the matter in His hands. Thus, I no longer need to be anxious over whatever problem it was that I prayed to Him about. I have left it in His hands. I can be at peace. Of course, depending on the circumstances, you may need to pray and also to take some action, but sometimes there is no action that you can take. Whether you can take some action or not, we need to pray and to give that matter over to the Lord and then to not worry about it anymore. We can be at peace.

Let’s return to James 5. Verse 13 says that if you are suffering, then pray; and if you are cheerful, sing praises. And verse 14 then says this – “¹⁴Is 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.” Here, some action is taken: the sick person doesn’t suffer alone but asks for prayer from the elders. The elders pray for him and anoint him with oil. What is this anointing with oil?

Bible commentators have had a variety of answers to that question. Does this anointing have some kind of sacramental purpose, bestowing God’s grace on the person and bringing healing? My favorite commentary says that a strongly sacramental interpretation of this verse is probably not correct. Or maybe this anointing with oil is purely medicinal in nature, not spiritual. I heard that viewpoint strongly asserted in a sermon I heard in my younger days, but such an interpretation never seemed right to me: there are a variety of ailments and a variety of medicines that would be appropriate to them, so because this passage just focuses on oil, it seems to me that its primary purpose is not medicinal. I was glad this week to discover that my commentary by Douglas Moo agrees with me.

What seems most likely is that the anointing with oil hearkens back to episodes of consecration that we read about in the Old Testament. For example, in Exodus 28:41, Aaron and his sons are anointed with oil and consecrated as priests of God. Kings can be anointed as well – for example, Saul is anointed with oil in 1 Samuel 10:1 and David in 1 Samuel 16:13. Biblical theologian Douglas Moo has this to say in his commentary on James 5:14:

Anointing frequently symbolizes the consecration of persons or things for God’s use and service in the Old Testament. Typical is Exodus 28:41. ... The same usage is continued and expanded in the New Testament, where anointing is often a metaphor for consecration to God’s service (Luke 4:18 [= Isa. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [= Ps. 45:7]). If James has this background in mind, then he would be recommending that the elders anoint the sick person in order vividly to show how that person is being set apart for God’s special attention in prayer.¹

This anointing with oil vividly illustrates that the sick person is being set apart for God’s special attention in prayer.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000), 240.

Let's read James 5:15 – “¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.” This prayer should be offered in faith. It is interesting to me that James then mentions sin. If the sick person has committed any sins, they will be forgiven. Is there a connection between sin and sickness?

This reminds me of an incident I read about in the life of Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch lady whose family saved some Jews during World War 2 by hiding them in her house. The first book she wrote was entitled *The Hiding Place*, which you have probably heard about. Her second book was entitled *Tramp for the Lord*, and it tells about her worldwide ministry after the war. I vividly remember an incident at the beginning of her second book when she was feeling sick, and so a pastor who had the gift of healing was called in to pray for her. Unexpectedly, the pastor asked Corrie if she had any unconfessed sin in her life. Well, the answer was Yes. I don't quite recall what the sin was – maybe she was holding a grudge against someone. It was striking to me that the pastor who was said to have a gift of healing first displayed a gift of discernment by noticing that she likely had an unconfessed sin that she was harboring. Corrie confessed the sin, the pastor prayed for her, and she was healed.

James 5:16 – “¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” If we have sin in our lives, that sin might be affecting our health. Sickness doesn't always mean there is a sin in someone's life, but it is a possibility. James advises his fellow Christians to confess their sins to one another. If you have sinned against someone, you ought to go to the person and confess it.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has this to say to the person who is making an offering at the temple, Matthew 5:23-24 – ²³“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

Back to James 5:16. Confess your sins to one another. And pray for one another. Healing can be experienced if there have been any sins causing an illness and you confess your sins. Look at the second sentence of verse 16 – “... The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” If you have your life in order, both in heart and in actions, and you are living by Christian standards, your prayers can have much power. This is available to any of us disciples of Christ.

Let's look at James 5:17-18 – “¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.” We think of Elijah as a great prophet who did many heroic deeds, something we could never think that we could do. But James here highlights the simple fact that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” His nature was just like any other human being's. But he was obedient to his call and when he prayed earnestly, God answered. And when he prayed earnestly again, God answered again. You and I have the same opportunity to have effective prayer. Clean out the sin in your life, have an honest heart, pray in faith (confident that God can answer), and then you, too, can have prayers that accomplish much.

Today's passage of Scripture is James's closing remarks in this epistle. These remarks look very different than the closing of Paul's letters, for example. But Paul's letters often end with exhortations to prayer and to living upright lives. Here, James also has a focus on prayer and on the essential truth that we must forsake sin. The last two verses of his epistle get to the basic heart of the gospel message: turning from sin and receiving salvation from God.

James 5:19-20 – “¹⁹My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back,
²⁰let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

In his letter, James has given many practical exhortations on living the Christian life. Every congregation needs to hear these words. All of the New Testament epistles contain exhortations to forsake certain sins, because no Christian is perfect yet, and we all need this instruction. Here in verse 19, James tells his audience that some people in their congregation may stray from the instructions he has given and fall into one of the sinful attitudes or actions he has mentioned in the letter. We need to call on such a person to turn back, to repent of his sin. Verse 20 says that if he does turn away from his error, we have saved him – his sins have been covered. To have sins “covered” means to have them completely blotted out, completely erased and no longer counted against us.

I would like to close today’s message with a question: What is in your heart? As we learned in chapter 4 of James, the source of quarrels and conflicts is the selfish pleasures and wrong motives that inhabit our hearts. In chapter 3, we learned about the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts, leading to vicious speech. Also in chapter 3 we read about human reasonings, which we ought to forsake and instead seek the wisdom that comes from God. In chapter 2, we read about the favoritism we practice because we’re valuing rich people over poor people. And in chapter 1, we learned about the lust that dwells inside us and which could lead us to fall to temptation and sin if we do not halt the process. We also read an exhortation to pray in faith, without doubting, because doubting shows a double-mindedness that makes our lives unstable.

What is in your heart? Do some self-examination. Is there lust ... or selfish ambition ... or double-mindedness ... or human, earth-bound reasonings in your heart? James 4:8b – “... Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Examine your heart and clean it out.

Let me close with King David’s prayer in Psalm 51 (verses 10, 12, and 13) – “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ... ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You.” If we rid our lives of sin and if we deal with our heart problem by letting the Lord renew our hearts, we will have harmony in our relationships, peace with God, and then we can be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ to the people around us.