

Logan Smith
January 15th, 2023

James 5:12-20

Practical Instructions for Putting our Faith into Practice

As we've gone through the book of James over the last 3 months, the main message of the book has been pretty clear: if we have genuine faith in the gospel of Christ Jesus, then our faith will necessarily produce works of repentance and obedience in our lives. When we walked through Galatians last Spring, Paul's clear message was, "We are justified - forgiven from our sins and declared righteous - not by our works or obeying the Law but purely by grace through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ." And as we've seen, James does not disagree with Paul about this; they both affirm these two statements: that "we are saved by grace through faith alone," and also that "the faith that saves never *is* alone" - that is, real, genuine saving faith in Christ always goes on to produce good works of repentance and obedience. And that has been the overwhelming message of the book of James: true faith is a visible faith; true faith bears fruit; true faith *works*. When the gospel takes root in our hearts it necessarily produces fruit in our lives.

James has been driving that point home to us - that "faith without works is dead" and doesn't save anybody - that true believers must be "doers of the Word" and not just hearers. But it hasn't just been a theological treatise or scholarly essay on this subject; it's been an intensely, even uncomfortably, practical book full of convicting, real-life applications. So he's shown what it looks like to have a genuine, active, working faith when it comes to suffering, dealing with our money and time, caring for the poor and vulnerable, using our words, putting off worldliness and pursuing the wisdom and holiness of God, and living together as God's people in the local church. Each section has convicted us of our sin, but also encouraged us to live in light of the gospel in incredibly practical, tangible ways. So it shouldn't surprise us, then, that as we come to the conclusion of the book, James closes with a few final words of challenging, practical instructions for living out our faith - not just as individual Christians, but also as a local church family. James transitions to his conclusion in v.12, but this is usually lost on us in most of our English translations. The beginning of v.12 literally reads in English, "But above all, brothers, do not swear..." leading us to think that this prohibition of taking oaths is more important than his other commands. But I don't think that's the best way to understand this. Instead, it seems most likely that this phrase, "above all," was a common Greek phrase used to transition into the concluding section of a letter. Robert Plummer, a faithful pastor and seminary professor, explains

it this way: “Rather than introducing the most important element of the letter (as a modern reader might expect), this stylized phrase was employed by ancient Greek writers to transition to the final section(s) of their correspondence. A modern English equivalent would be something like, ‘Now, to wrap things up....’¹ So James is wrapping up his letter and concludes with three brief sections of practical instruction and exhortation: 1. That our words should always be truthful and trustworthy; 2. For praying to the Lord in all circumstances of life; and 3. That we love one another enough to pursue each other when we wander away from the truth of the gospel, seeking one another’s repentance and restoration. So let’s walk through each of these sections, and since the section on prayer contains several different sets of instructions, we’ll have several points that cover it. But first, we see that...

I. We should always speak the truth so that our words are honorable and trustworthy (5:12)

As Christians, we should be people of honor and integrity, so that others can trust us at our word. We see this in v.12: “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.” What does it mean, “do not swear?” For starters, this isn’t talking about cursing. I think the point here is that we are being prohibited from swearing oaths that aren’t true, that we don’t mean, or that shouldn’t be necessary in the first place. It’s an issue of the heart, of whether or not we are people of truth, honor, and integrity. This is why James warns us against condemnation. Once again, James is directly referencing the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matt. 5:33-37; after quoting the Old Testament command to not swear falsely and to always fulfill our oaths, Jesus says “Do not take an oath at all,” but instead “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No;’ anything more than this comes from evil.”

Think about when someone says something that they know you don’t believe, so they follow it up with wide eyes and a high-pitched, “I swear!” Why do people do this? It’s because they know their words aren’t considered trustworthy and they want to convince you to trust them. Sometimes people do this because they’re intentionally lying, and they’re desperately trying to convince you of their false sincerity. This is self-evidently wrong; we should never lie or bear false witness or promise to do something that we have no intention of doing. Sometimes people make swears when they really are telling the truth, but this is such a rare occasion that

¹ Robert Plummer, *ESV Expository Commentary*, “James,” p.280. See also Moo, *James*, pp.293-295.

they know no one will believe it, so they make solemn oaths and swear on all that they hold dear, like their mother's grave or whatnot. Christians shouldn't do this, because we should *always* be in the habit of telling the truth. Why? Because we know that we will give an account before the Lord, meaning *all of our words and oaths matter*. As Christians, our words should be honorable and trustworthy; when we give our word, that should mean something. We should always speak truthfully, and when we give our word that we will do something, we should always honor that, as best we can, so that our "yes" means yes and our "no" means no. There shouldn't be any reason for anything more. So let us be committed to telling the truth because all truth comes from God and He cannot lie. Let us strive to keep our word, just as God never breaks His promises, so that our word is honorable and means something.

Secondly, James gives us instructions on prayer, leading us to our second point...

II. We should pray in every circumstance, whether suffering or cheerful (5:13-18)

James abruptly transitions to talking about prayer, exhorting us to pray to the Lord in every circumstance of our life, by asking and answering two questions that reach from one end of the spectrum of human experience to the other: whether in suffering or when all is going well.

He begins in v.13: "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray." We saw last week that we all suffer; it's a guaranteed part of this life, even as Christians. James told us to patiently endure suffering by looking to the Second Coming of Christ, when He will usher in final judgment and salvation. In the first chapter of the letter, he told us to persevere by counting all trials a joy, since God is using them for our spiritual growth and endurance. But now James reminds us that the most basic, fundamental way to respond to the Lord in suffering is *prayer*. The only right response to suffering is to turn to the Lord in faith: and that means we have to *pray*, to personally cry out to God. Indeed, that's exactly *how* we patiently endure suffering through faith and consider it all joy: we do so by *turning to the Lord in prayer*. When suffering comes, when you're at your weakest, darkest point, when you feel like giving up, *pray*; turn to the Lord. No matter how weak and hopeless you feel, no matter how plagued you are with doubt and despair, when you respond to suffering with prayer, you are choosing to trust in the Lord.

James doesn't give any practical details on how to do this here, but the rest of the Bible gives tons. And I think the most helpful, practical advice on how to pray to the Lord in times of suffering and difficulty comes from the Psalms - specifically, Psalms of Lament, like Psalm 13. In the modern Church age, we've forgotten the biblical art of lament, and we desperately need to

recover it as a means of praying to the Lord amidst suffering. They teach us 3 basic steps of how to pray, to *lament*, to God in suffering: 1. First, cry out to God and express the anguish and pain of your heart, laying your sufferings and burdens at His feet; 2. Second, ask God to help you, to alleviate your suffering and even take it away; and finally, 3. Pray until you come to a place of trusting the Lord with your suffering; ask God to help you trust Him, to strengthen your heart to persevere in these trials, that He would use these trials for your spiritual growth, that He would hold you fast, and that He would even help you to come to the place where you can sincerely count it all joy as you trust the Lord to bear you through the storm. Ask the Lord to give you the strength and wisdom you need to navigate these trials, to patiently endure your suffering, that you may persevere in righteousness, by His grace. Brothers and sisters, if you're suffering cry out to the Lord, for He loves you and holds you in His hands.

But we shouldn't just pray in times of suffering; we should turn to God *in all circumstances of life*. James emphasizes this by jumping to the opposite end of human experience, telling us to praise God when all is going well. We see this in the rest of v.13: "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." We shouldn't just turn to God when things are going bad; we should turn to Him when things are going well, too. After all, everything good in our life, "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Therefore, we should turn to Him when we are cheerful and going well. Funny enough, sometimes it might actually be harder to turn to God in the good times than it is in the bad. Suffering naturally prompts us to cry out to God for help. Sometimes it's *harder* for us to turn to God when everything is going well. This is why we need to build in natural rhythms and patterns in our lives that prompt us to do this. This is one of the reasons why we must prioritize gathering together on Sundays, singing praises to God, just like we've done this morning. We're commanded to do it. And yes, we can sing praises on our own - and we should! - but when we build this time of gathering together, weekly, to sing praises to God and give Him thanks and praise in our prayers together, it encourages and strengthens our hearts to keep turning to God in the good times as well as the bad. This is also why Christians typically praying at meal times. We usually eat three times a day - so that's three natural opportunities to pause and thank God for giving us that food! And don't stop there: take that as a built-in opportunity to thank God for every good thing you have, for "every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of lights"! And I'd encourage all of us to push ourselves, more and more, to carve out time for

praying and praising God, in prayer and song, on the good days, the bad days, and everything in between.

Next, James gives instructions for praying for the sick:

III. We should call for the elders of the church to pray for those seriously sick (5:14-15)

We see this in vv.14-15: “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. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.” Now, there’s a lot to unpack here, and lots of room for confusion and misunderstanding. First, we must ask, what does he mean by “sick” here? I think James is referring to severe sickness, not your average cold. There’s several reasons for this: the individual is calling for the elders instead of going to them, suggesting he might not be able to. Second, the elders are to “pray over” him; while this is common language for us today, it’s not common in the Bible, suggesting they are *literally* praying “over” him, because he’s bedridden, or unable to stand. Finally, James describes the Lord’s healing in terms of the Lord raising him up, which suggests that he is able now to stand or get out of his bed. So if you become seriously ill or bedridden, we’re told to “call for the elders of the church.”

But who are they? The New Testament often uses three words - elders, pastors, and overseers - interchangeably, so that they all refer to the same office: the “elders” of a local church are men who are called by God, and recognized by the local church, being spiritually mature and able to rightly teach and defend the Word of God, in order to lead the church and provide spiritual oversight through the ministry of the Word, prayer, and pastoral care.² This is what we normally call a “pastor” today, and the Bible uses that word sometimes, but most often, it uses the word “elder.” James here assumes that every local church will have *multiple* elders (as we see throughout the New Testament), which means that the modern practice of churches having lone ranger pastors, or treating one special as a “senior pastor” is really out of step with the biblical model, where each should be led by a group of elders. And our goal should always be to work towards being as biblical as possible, meaning we should aspire to have multiple elders here at Bread of Life, as well, since we currently only have one official elder (me).

² See, for example, Acts 14:23; 20:17, 27-30; 1 Tim. 3:1; 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1.

Nevertheless, the sick person is supposed to call the elders of the church to come and “pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” Anointing with oil in the Bible is a common way of symbolically setting someone apart for God’s blessing; in this case, it’s a tangible expression of marking someone out in prayer for healing. This is similar to how we often lay hands on people when we’re praying for them; it’s a way of symbolically, physically expressing our prayer for a specific person. That said, I was convinced this week from studying this passage that I should start doing this when you guys are hospitalized or if you’re diagnosed with a serious illness. When we anoint with oil and lay on hands in prayer, it forces us to take the prayer more seriously, to intentionally seek after the healing of God, and forces us to give God the glory when he brings healing. And the Lord loves to answer prayers from His people in this way, often answering prayers for healing from His people, especially when they are asked publicly and sincerely - and we’ve seen God answer prayers like that time and time again, even here at our church, haven’t we? The language James uses here is hyperbolic, just like much of Jesus’s language is. No, we don’t have a guarantee that we’ll always be healed; but we *should* earnestly pray for healing, having great faith that the Lord can bring miraculous healing - and even if He chooses not to, we must have an unshakeable faith that He’s still using the suffering for our good, that His grace is sufficient for us, and that when Christ returns, we will be raised up to have glorified bodies that never get sick again.

But there’s one last issue here to work through: the end of v.15 continues, saying, “And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” What does this mean? He’s not saying that having the elders pray for you and anoint you with oil will magically take your sins away and forgive you (as is implied in the Roman Catholic practice of “extreme unction”). No, we know that forgiveness for sins only comes through personal faith in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. So what is James saying here? I think James is recognizing the possibility that this sickness is due to sin. Now, certainly not all sickness is due to sin, but sometimes it is. For example, in 1 Corinthians, Paul tells them that some of them are sick because they have been abusing the Lord’s Supper. So, the idea is probably that the call for the elders is an opportunity for the individual to confess and repent of sin as he examines himself, and then the elders can pray for him, both for his sickness and sin.

So when you get seriously sick, when you're bedridden, or in the hospital, or get a cancer diagnosis, or whatever it may be, don't despair; pray to God; and *call out to God's people* to pray for you as well. Share it at the prayer meeting; and I also encourage you to do what James says here: call the elders of our church - call and ask me - to come and pray over you and anoint you with oil, whether here at church, or if you're unable to come, then I'll come to you. We'll pray for steadfast, joyful endurance and spiritual growth in the suffering and for healing; and if it does turn out that you have unrepentant sin going on, it's a wonderful opportunity to confess your sins, that you may be relieved of God's discipline and assured of forgiveness through the gracious promise of the gospel as you repent.

And of course, we *all* need this, not just when we're sick but all the time, because we all sin all the time. So this leads James to broaden out this command, tell us that...

IV. We should regularly confess our sins to each other and pray for one another (16a)

We see this in the first part of v.16 "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." The word for "healing" here always refers to physical healing, and I think that's the best way to take it here, too. But this doesn't just apply to when we're sick: the point is, we should have a church culture where it's normal for us to confess our sins to one another. And note that it isn't the elders who are praying in this verse: it's all the different members of the church. This verse is about the *preventative medicine* of confessing our sins to and praying for one another. All of us, even the most spiritually mature among us, continually fall into sin and temptation. To my shame, I've been reminded just this week how sinful and broken and weak I am. And in those moments, when I sin, and am convicted and ashamed of it, that absolute *last* thing in the world that I want to do is tell anyone about it! But this week, as the Lord convicted me of sin in my life, and I repented of it before the Lord, I knew that I had to confess it to a brother as well; if I didn't, I would be adding the sin of pride to my list of offenses. Not only does my prideful flesh not want people to know that I'm weak and sinful, but my prideful flesh is also tempted to think that I don't need anyone's help fighting sin, that I can do it on my own - which is just a flat-out lie; none of us can. And as this text subtly reminded me, we have to take our sin seriously or else God just may bring discipline and the affliction of sickness into our lives until we do. So when all this was going through my mind earlier this week, I confessed my sin to Cliff later that day, he reminded me that I am forgiven of these sins because my faith in Christ, whose blood has washed all my sin away, and that my

righteousness is not based on how much I obey or how little I sin, but purely on Jesus's sacrificial death and resurrection in my place; Cliff helped me think through how to fight this sin and pursue holiness; and he prayed for me. It was incredibly helpful and freeing, and the Lord has used it this week to bring healing into my heart.

And that's exactly what *all of us* need from each other, all the time. In a healthy church - one that understands both the sinfulness of every member and the infinite grace of the gospel - it should be normal for us to confess our sins to one another and receive the assurance of forgiveness in the gospel and prayer for deliverance from our sins. It's good for our hearts to confess, and we *need* the encouragement, assurance, and help of our brothers and sisters in our fight of faith. So if you're not in the habit of confessing your sins to others, or if you're burdened by a particular sin eating you up inside, I encourage you to confess it to brothers and sisters in the church. If it's appropriate, perhaps you can confess it tonight at the prayer meeting, or with the Women's or Men's small group. Or if it's a more sensitive sin issue, as is most often the case, I encourage you to find a trusted brother or sister in the church that you can confess your sin to. If you're not sure who that may be, you can always come and talk to me. And if the thought of confessing your sin to someone else terrifies you, then you should do it all the more, so that you can be reminded and assured of just how much grace there is for you in Christ. And that's because, when someone confesses our sins to us, and they are trusting in Christ alone for salvation, then we should *definitely not* scold, judge, or shame them; they know they've done wrong, that's why they are confessing! In that moment, we should *rejoice* that they are broken over their sin, confessing it, and asking for help; that's a visible sign of repentance and faith! So when a fellow believer confesses sin to us, let us be quick to pounce on them with grace and love, reminding them that they are completely forgiven, that their stains of sin are washed clean by the blood of Christ, and that they stand as white as snow before the Lord, covered in the righteousness of Christ. But let us be sure to pray with them, that the Lord would deliver them from the particular sin, and help them in their fight for holiness.

And just in case the idea of praying for healing and sin is daunting, James reminds us that we should pray because...

V. We should remember that the prayers of ordinary believers are powerful (16b-18)

The idea of praying for God to heal someone seriously sick might scare us. We might worry, "What if God doesn't bring healing?" The thought of confessing sin might be even

scarier. So James encourages us to pray bold prayers of faith by reminding us of the power of prayer in the rest of v.16: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” The “righteous person” is a believer - anyone who repents of their sin and places their faith in Christ alone is declared to be a righteous person before God, clothed in the very righteousness of Christ. That means, if you’re in Christ this morning, you are a righteous person! And that means your prayers have great power in them. Why? Because the prayers of God’s people rise before him like incense; He cares for His children, and loves to answer our prayers when we pray according to His will and come in Jesus’s name, not our own. But still we bashfully push back, “My prayers aren’t powerful! I’m not Peter or Paul! I’m no Moses or Elijah! I’m not even the most spiritually mature person at church! Maybe *her* prayers or *his* prayers are powerful, but not mine!” But when we think that way, we’re allowing works-based righteousness to creep up in our hearts; we’re starting to think that it’s based on what we do or don’t do! But the whole point is putting our faith in what *God can do*, not what we do. So James encourages us by pointing to the example of Elijah, in vv.17-18: “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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”

The point is clear: Elijah was an ordinary man just like us. Yes, extraordinary things happened when he prayed - but that’s because *God* is extraordinary, not Elijah! And we know the same extraordinary God! His son shed His blood to redeem us and declare us righteous. His own Spirit dwells within us! Therefore, let us be encouraged to pray bold prayers of faith, no matter the circumstances of our life, but especially in suffering, sickness, and sin, so that we might see God’s people healed, delivered, and forgiven, all to the glory of our great God. We have just as much access to God in prayer as Elijah does, because we come before His throne through the veil that has been torn - that is, the flesh of Jesus Christ, slain for us, that we might be called sons of God. So let us boldly approach the eternal throne of God in prayer!

And let us pray earnestly for one another, especially those who wander astray, because...

VI. We should seek the repentance and restoration of those who wander from the truth (19-20)

We see this in the final two verses of the book: “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.”

These final verses are meant to do two things: 1. To exhort us to love one another enough that we will go after the sheep who goes astray and wanders from the truth of the gospel; and 2. To encourage us that it is never too late for someone to be restored, for if they repent and come back to the faith, their souls will be saved and their sins covered by the blood of Jesus. And this is a very fitting note for the book of James to end on, isn't it? After all, it's been a convicting book, all about how real, genuinely saving faith produces works and perseveres! But that's a sobering reminder when we think about those we know and love who used to profess faith in Christ but have now wandered away from the truth of God's Word. We've even seen members of our own church family do that in the last couple of years, and it's very painful to watch. When people don't repent from their sins, but choose it over Christ, they wander from the truth and towards death. If someone refuses to repent and falls away, and never returns, then they are on their way to condemnation and judgment, proving they were never truly believers.

But James calls to action when that happens, and not to lose hope. He tells us to love those who stray enough to go after them, to pursue them in love, to warn them that they are on the path to death, and to earnestly pray for their repentance and restoration. And if they repent and come back, then we should rejoice and shower them with grace, giving them full assurance of their salvation! For whoever repents and turns to Christ in faith, whether for the first time or the thousandth time, will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

And that's a word each one of us today needs to hear, cherish, and cling to. The Word of God has convicted us of our many sins and failures; we have fallen this week; perhaps James has revealed that we're more sinful than we even realized. But James the pastor ends on this gloriously gracious, encouraging note: no matter how dark the stains of your sin, no matter how many times you've fallen, no matter how far you've strayed from the truth, Christ's grace is sufficient for you! Simply turn from your sin, confess it, and receive forgiveness from the Lord, for Christ's blood was shed on that tree to wash away your every filthy stain of sin. If you've never done that before, but would like to become a Christian and be forgiven, please come and speak with me after the service. And if you're in Christ through faith this morning, then rest assured: you are forgiven, righteous, and blessed forevermore. Let us therefore go and put our faith into practice, showing who we truly are in Christ! Let us pray.