

Swearing, Praying, and Caring

James 5:12-20
David H. Roper

This is our final message on the book of James. In this concluding section James gathers together a number of loose ends. He deals with three topics: swearing, verse 12; praying, verses 13 through 18; and caring for one another, verses 19 and 20. Let's look first at verse 12 where James deals with the problem of swearing, or oath-taking:

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no: so that you may not fall under judgment.

You will notice that this is a repetition of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. James is not referring here to cursing or blasphemy or lewd speech. Rather, he is referring to the practice of affirming a statement or a promise by means of an oath. James says that this is forbidden to a Christian. It seems strange that he would forbid such a seemingly innocent practice.

Yet there were two practices prevalent in James' day which made this prohibition necessary. One was the custom people had of linking God with an oath and thus attempting to force God to act on their behalf by implicating him in their promise. If this is what James is alluding to it is in line with the previous paragraph in which he discusses our tendency to use God as a means of accomplishing our own ends. That may be what James is referring to here.

But he may be referring to the widespread practice of dishonesty. People simply were *not* honest. They were untrustworthy and couldn't be counted upon. One never knew when their word was true and so there grew up the practice of oath taking to insure honesty. In certain dealings where a man's trustworthiness was essential an oath would be taken but in all other areas his word meant nothing. James forbids this practice of guaranteeing our word by an oath because Christians always ought to be honest. There is really no reason why a Christian should ever use an oath. In every situation our word ought to be trustworthy. We don't have to take an oath in order to guarantee the truthfulness of any statement. Even our most casual conversation ought to be characterized by utter, absolute truthfulness.

Paul says in Colossians 3 that we are not to lie to one another, since we have put off the old man and his practices and have put on the new man which is being conformed to the image of God after true knowledge. That is, Christians, of all people, know the truth. Therefore there ought never to be any reason why anything but truth would come out of our lives. If we tell someone that we are going to be someplace at a particular time, then we ought to be there. If we give our word that we will accomplish some task, then we must accomplish it. If we describe something that we have seen, then our testimony ought to be in accord with the truth. You see, James is saying that there is no reason for a Christian ever to use an oath to verify what he is saying. Everything about him ought to be trustworthy. One of the marks of a Spirit-filled man is that he is faithful. You can count on his word.

Now, there are circumstances in which men are expected to take an oath. One, of course, is in a court of law. Even secular society recognizes that most men are not trustworthy but need to be coerced into honesty. Men will not be honest if it does not serve their interests and therefore their truthfulness must be artificially guaranteed or, failing that, they at least must be brought under the law of perjury so that there is some way to judge their dishonesty. So if a Christian takes an oath in a court of law he is not violating James' command. He is simply accommodating himself to a recognition of man's fallen condition, and of the fact that court procedure would otherwise be impossible. But he also fully recognizes that he does not need an oath to guarantee his own honesty. His honesty grows out of his relationship with his Lord. And so James says, in effect, "*Above all a Christian's word is dependable.*" Honesty for a Christian is not the best policy -- it is the only policy.

Beginning with verse 13 James turns to the issue of prayer:

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

James is recognizing that life is made up of triumph and tragedy, of sorrow and joy. We never know what to expect. Life is totally unpredictable. Yesterday I was safely cloistered in my office and cheerfully studying this passage. The phone rang. I never answer the phone on Saturday Morning but somehow I felt that I ought to pick it up. Carolyn, my wife, was on the line. She told me that Joshua, our 2-year-old, had just fallen off his trike and had landed on the back of his head. He was very limp and had been vomiting. She had called the doctor and he had told her to rush him to the hospital as, quickly as possible. So I jumped in my car and raced home to do that. Fortunately Joshua has recovered completely. He is running around the house this morning demolishing everything!

But it is interesting that I was studying this very passage at that time. I thought how true it is that life can change so radically -- in just a matter of a few seconds. We never know what is ahead. That is the way life is. And yet James says that in every circumstance of life we are to pray. There is one constant factor in our life, and that is Jesus Christ. Everything must be related to him. Circumstances change. Our emotions change. People change. Our attitudes change. But the one thing that never changes is our Lord Jesus. Stability in our life comes from relating everything to him. If you are suffering, James says, then pray. If you are cheerful, then give thanks, sing psalms, Sing praises to God. Relate every thing to Jesus Christ because he is the one who doesn't change. He is the same -- yesterday, today, and forever.

The Scriptures tell us that suffering is the normal expectation of every believer Peter says, "Don't think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you, but rejoice inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings." We shouldn't be alarmed when times of suffering come. It is the normal expectation of every believer. Paul says "For unto you it is graciously given on behalf of Christ not only to believe on his name but also to suffer for his sake."

Even though suffering is standard operating procedure for Christians it still can have the effect of causing us to give way to self-pity and to become sullen or resentful or despairing, to get discouraged, and to sense very keenly our weakness and inability to cope with life. James says that in a circumstance like that we should pray. Jesus said, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint." When we sense that the pressures of life are greater than we can bear, James says, "pray."

Now, it is true that prayer changes things but, more fundamentally, prayer changes us. Prayer is the means by which God gets us in line with what he is doing in our life. It is his method of aligning us with his program and giving us his perspective on things. So if, in suffering, we *will* pray, the result will be a knowledge of what God is

accomplishing in our life and the capacity to face the trying situation. Note the parallel with what Paul says in Romans 8. The context there is also suffering. He says that when we suffer and don't know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that are too deep to be uttered. That is, he identifies with our suffering, and He prays for us *according to the will of God*. As we pray and listen to that quiet voice of the Spirit of God within us we are aligned with the will of God. Therefore James says, "When you are suffering, pray."

He also says, "When you are cheerful, pray." Because the good times can beget spiritual indifference and cause us to assume that we can cope with everything. So even when times are good it is just as necessary to relate to God and to express our thanksgiving and praise and appreciation to Jesus Christ.

Prayer, James says, equips us for every area of life,

He continues on the theme of prayer and, in verse 14, emphasizes a particular kind of prayer:

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 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 passage has been variously interpreted. It is the passage from which the Roman Catholic Church derives its doctrine of the sacrament of Extreme Unction. They believe that the last rites performed by the priest prepare the soul of man to enter into death, that this is the final and greatest temptation and that his faith is sustained and supported in some way by these last rites. With all respect to our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, I have never been able to see how they derive that interpretation from this passage. James is not talking about preparation of the soul for death. He is talking, rather, about raising a man up from sickness and restoring him to health and wholeness.

Others have relegated this particular passage to an early period of the church when the Apostles employed healing as a means of validating the Gospel. Their conclusion is that this passage is not relevant to the church today. But this is not a word addressed to Apostles. It is addressed to elders. I believe, therefore, that this principle is operative now and has to do with the way the church operates today.

There are several things that I would like you to observe in these two verses. The first is that the sickness in question is an illness caused by sin. Note the last part of verse 15: ". . . if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him." In the Greek, the type of conditional clause that James uses here indicates a probable condition, i.e., his sickness is almost certainly caused by some form of sin.

Now, not all sickness of course, is a result of a specific sin. Sickness, in general is a result of sin, in general. Sickness is a result of our partnership in a fallen race. But not all sickness results from specific sin. James settled that issue in John 9. The disciples asked concerning the blind man, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither, but it was in order that the works of God might be manifested in this individual." In this case his sickness was not the result of any specific sin.

But there are some sicknesses which are the result of sin that is persisted in. If any of us rebels against the truth, and if we continue to rebel over a long period of time, the result can be an outbreak of emotional or physical illness. Sin persisted in weakens and sickens and eventually causes death. Paul says in I Corinthians 11 that because some were misusing the Lord's table they were sick and weak, and some had even died. I John 5 refers to a sin which is a sin unto death, i.e., physical death. This is a sin which a Christian can commit; and it is this type

of sin which James is dealing with here.

Another observation is that it is the sick person who takes the initiative. It is the ailing member of the body who calls upon the rest of the body to come to his aid. This is analogous to the way our own human body works. If one part of our body is sick it calls for help, it aches, and all the resources of the body are directed toward that ailing member. James says that if this should be the case in the body of Christ the sick member should call for the elders of the church. He takes the initiative, and they come at his bidding. In all of us there is a subtle pride which tends to keep us from calling for help. We feel that it is a mark of weakness if we can't endure alone. And yet James says that there are times in our life when we must depend upon others. There are some things that we cannot cope with apart from the resources of the rest of the body of Christ. This is the situation here.

A third observation is that he calls for the elders -- because they represent the whole body. The elders come and perform two services. First they anoint with oil. This is not a medicinal use of oil but, rather a symbolic use. Oil is a symbol of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who heals, and this anointing is a symbolic recognition that it is His power which can heal a man. Second, they pray in faith. James doesn't mean that they somehow muster the necessary faith to believe that this man will be healed. The point is that these *are* men of faith, men are convinced that God is a healing God and that he can make this sick person whole.

James says that there is a two-fold result. Sins are forgiven and the body is healed. The prayer offered in faith will restore and will give health and wholeness to the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, his sins will be forgiven. Note again that this is a very special case, This is a man who has been persisting in sin. The sin has resulted in a particular type of illness. The sick one initiates a call to the elders and they come and anoint him with oil and pray. And this man, James says, will be restored.

In verses 16 through 18 James is still dealing with the subject of prayer. He moves to the type of prayer ministry which each of us ought to be carrying on with one another:

Therefore, 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. Elijah 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. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Note the preposition which introduces this passage; "therefore". Wherever you encounter that preposition it almost always indicates a conclusion. Verse 16, therefore, is a conclusion from verses 14 and 15. This, then, seems to be his argument. Because sin is such a destructive thing it can ultimately kill you. *Therefore*, confess your faults to one another. That is, don't allow sin to go on unjudged. Keep short accounts. Help one another to deal with sin.

Notice that this ministry is not reserved to the elders. This is something that all members of the body of Christ are to do. The church is a fellowship of *mutual* concern. So if a brother is struggling with sin in his life and can find no deliverance he should share this area of defeat with another brother who will pray for him. The result will be that he will be healed. The word that James uses in verse 16 for "confession" means "to say the same thing out", i.e., to agree with what God has said about sin, and to agree openly. We are not to defend sin in our life. We are not to cover it up. We are to agree openly with God.

So what James is saying is that there are some sins that we cannot cope with alone. There are long-standing habits which have such a grip on our lives that there is no way we can find deliverance alone. We need the strength of the body. And if we go to another member of the body of Christ, someone who loves us and cares for

us, and if we share that area of defeat with him openly, and if he prays for us, there will be healing.

James is not saying, however, that we should tell everyone about our wickedness. That is not what he is talking about. We are to go to a brother because we want healing, not because we want to revel in relating all the sordid ugliness in our life. We want deliverance. So in our desire to find deliverance we go to a brother and expose the problem before him, and he prays for us with the result that there is healing.

I talked recently to a brother in Christ who had been very active in a teaching ministry for a number of years. Yet he sensed that there was no power in his life. He knew that this was because there was an area of his life where he had never found deliverance. He knew what the Scriptures taught. He wanted to be set free. And yet for some reason he couldn't break away from the habit. So he went to another brother and he shared this sin with this friend. They committed themselves to pray for each other for a period of time. And in time the Lord completely delivered him from this habit. You see, this had been an area of his life with which he couldn't cope at all. He needed help from the rest of the body. And when he received that kind of help there was deliverance and freedom and power.

Note the promise in the last part of verse 16: "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." The prayers of righteous men work. They are effective. Any member of the body of Jesus Christ is righteous in the sense that God has declared him righteous, justified in Christ. As an illustration James uses Elijah who was a man with a nature like ours, i.e., a human nature with its limitations, and yet he was able by prayer to control the forces of nature. So if prayer can control the forces of nature, how much more can it control our human nature. It is because the prayer is directed to God, who can change all of us. Prayer will heal the sinning brother and make him whole.

Throughout this book James has revealed the truth to us. His final word, in verses 19 through 20, is;

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns his back, let 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.

He says that there is every possibility that the members of the family will stray. As the hymn says, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love" We all sense that there is a tendency on the part of all of us to stray away from the truth. What happens when a member of the body strays? Does James say to criticize him, to ostracize him, to cut him off, to turn your back on him? NO! He says to turn the sinner from the evil of his way. Rescue him! Go to him in love and restore him. Paul writes in Galatians 6, "If you see a brother overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness." Restore him. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ"

I am sure that all of you have heard the story of the boy who was trudging through the ghetto with a little crippled boy on his back. Someone asked how he could carry such a heavy load. "The boy responded, He ain't heavy. He's my brother!" When we see a brother or a sister who is falling it is our responsibility to go to him, to pick him up and support him, to encourage him and turn him back to the truth. James says that the result will be that we will turn a sinner from the error of his way, we will save his soul from death, and we will cover a multitude of sins. James uses death metaphorically in this book. He is not referring primarily to physical death but rather to the death-like state that exists when people don't respond to the truth. We have all experienced this death - the boredom, frustration, and emptiness which is the consequence of disobedience to the truth. James says that when someone wanders away from the truth we are to go to that brother and lovingly restore him. In this way we will save his soul from that death-like state, and we will cover a multitude of sins, i.e., secure

forgiveness for him.

Now, those two actions -- salvation from death and forgiveness of sins - are the actions of God. Only God can save a soul from death. And only God can forgive sins. And yet we are given the privilege of being a co-worker with God. We can do what He is doing in the lives of people and can share with him in the ministry of restoration. These are most awesome words And here James ends his epistle very abruptly. There is no benediction, no doxology, no gesture of farewell. It is as though he doesn't want to deflect our minds from the privilege and responsibility of caring for one another. So perhaps we should conclude this series with James' final words; "He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins"

Father, we thank you that we gain from your word the knowledge that we are responsible for one another. We can't live our lives in isolation. We are responsible to love one another and to care for one another, to bear one another's burdens. and to live openly and honestly before one another. We thank you, Father, for the strength and the support and the cleansing that comes when we share our lives. We ask that the principles in this book will be ours. We know that you are the One who gives us both the will and the desire to obey, and we thank you, Lord, for your power which is available to us to accomplish this, in Christ's name, Amen.

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