

JAS. 5:7-20

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VII. Encouragement to stand firm during oppression by rich (5:7-11)

A. In view of their ultimate vindication *vis-a-vis* the rich oppressors, they must stand firm until that day, i.e., until the coming of the Lord. As a farmer does not quit on his crop even though the harvest is yet future, so they must not quit on their faith even though its vindication or reward is yet future.

B. In fact, they should be strengthened to stand by the nearness of the Judge.

1. The nearness of the Lord's return is indicated in a number of places in the N.T. (e.g., Rom. 13:12; 1 Pet. 4:7). Some scholars claim that the N.T. writers erred in asserting that the Lord's return was near, but I think they are misunderstanding what the inspired writers meant.

2. Since Jesus' resurrection, we have been in the last stage of human history. All that remains is the consummation. We do not know the day or hour of his coming, but we know that it is always imminent. He could come swiftly in any generation.

3. Here's how Moo puts it:

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near*.

C. In the interim, as they wait in the midst of trials, they must not turn on one another. To do so would be to risk judgment themselves.

D. The prophets serve as a good illustration of those who "hung tough" in the midst of trials. Those who endured are considered blessed; in other words, the wisdom of their choice is universally recognized. As with Job, those who are faithful in suffering ultimately receive the Lord's compassion and mercy.

VIII. Concluding remarks (5:12-20)

A. Instruction not to swear (5:12)

1. Swearing is not dirty language. It is to appeal to God or to some sacred object to guarantee the truth of what we say.

2. Perhaps the poor Christians were tempted to bolster their credibility in disputes with their more powerful, ungodly oppressors (e.g., when being cheated or falsely accused by them).

3. James, in accordance with Jesus' instructions in Mat. 5:34-37, forbids them from swearing. It could be that Jesus simply wanted to keep Christians from the "oath game" (see, Mat. 23:16-22), from what had become a popular method of deceiving the unaware. Since every word of theirs was to be honest and binding, there was no place for them to offer sworn speech as distinctively trustworthy. To do so was an indictment against one's own integrity.

4. Johnson puts it like this:

If speech is meant to be a primary symbol of the self, if it is from the heart's overflow that the tongue is meant to speak, then the invocation of a special realm (whether heaven or earth) or power (the name of the Lord) to buttress one's own speech becomes, paradoxically, an admission that one's own speech is untrustworthy without such warrant. The more towering the oath, the more impressive the power invoked to support my own statement, the more suspect my innate truthfulness appears.

5. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that the sect of Jews known as Essenes shared this view. He wrote: "Every statement of theirs is surer than an oath and with them swearing is avoided, for they think it worse than perjury. For they say that he who is not trustworthy except when he appeals to God is already under condemnation" (quoted in Johnson, 327).

6. This prohibition probably is limited to voluntary oaths. In an official oath, one that responsible authorities require, the one swearing is not offering the testimony as more reliable. He is simply complying with someone else's requirement for trustworthiness.

7. If Paul's "witness formula" (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20) qualifies as swearing, it may be that love requires that voluntary oaths be given when skepticism makes them necessary to benefit others. See also, God swearing (Heb. 6:17). There's a difference in my swearing to you that my elixir is an antidote to a snake bite so you'll buy my product and my swearing that it's an antidote so you'll take it before you die.

B. Instruction re suffering, cheer, and illness (5:13-18)

1. They are to pray in suffering, during all sorts of afflictions and trial (see "suffering" in v. 10). They should pray for wisdom (1:5) and for strength to endure the hardship faithfully, not necessarily for deliverance from it.

2. They are to sing praise to God when cheerful, when they are comforted and happy in heart (a state that does not depend on outward circumstances). It is easy for us to forget God when we are in good spirits, but we must remember that he is the giver of our contentment. Singing praise is closely related to prayer (1 Cor. 14:15); in fact, it can be seen as a form of prayer.

3. James 5:14 almost certainly means "Is anyone among you *sick*?" meaning physically ill rather than spiritually weak. This is recognized by virtually all modern English translations.

a. When this word (*asthenō*) is used to indicate spiritual weakness, that meaning is made clear by some kind of qualifier or by the context.

b. The Gospels, which include the accounts that have exercised the greatest influence on James's vocabulary and theology, it always denotes physical illness.

c. The only other N.T. reference to the practice of anointing with oil (Mk. 6:13) is in relation to physical healing.

4. The person is so sick as to be "laid out." This is suggested by the fact he is to summon the elders to him, rather than go to them, and the fact the elders are to "pray *over* him."

5. The "elders of the church" are the leaders of the congregation who are spiritually mature Christians. They are described in the N.T. by three Greek words: *presbuteros* (translated "elder" or rarely "presbyter"), *poimen* (translated "shepherd" or "pastor"), and *episkopos* (translated "overseer" or "bishop").

6. Olive oil is to be applied by the elders in conjunction with their praying. The oil in this case may serve as a sign or symbol that the sick person is being set apart for God's special attention and care or as an expression of faith that the sick person will be returned to normal.¹ It almost certainly is not mentioned here as a form of medical

¹ As McGuigan notes (in an email): Oil-anointing was a daily part of toiletry. it was only left off in times of stress, mourning, penitence and the like. It was a (non)visible marker that things were not "normal." Daniel in distress (ch 9) won't anoint himself, David while baby is in danger won't anoint himself, some Pharisees while fasting made a big deal out of not anointing. In contrast, people "normally" anointed themselves: David goes back to normality by anointing when he hears the baby has died, Christ urges his own to anoint themselves despite stress or whatever, and in Mark 6:13 the apostles anointed people they were about to heal miraculously (so the oil wasn't medicine). All that to say, that anointing a sick man with oil while praying for him was a sign of faith that the man was about to be healed. They were getting him ready for his restoration to the ranks of the normal. Today we'd press his suit, iron his shirt and shave him.

treatment. Though oil can be used medicinally, and was so used in the ancient world, it is unlikely that James is referring to a medicinal use because:

- a. Oil would not be good medicine for every illness.
- b. Anyone would be as suitable as the elders to apply a purely medicinal remedy (and would no doubt have already done so).
- c. James indicates that the prayer saves the sick, not the oil (either via innate healing properties or via some sacramental power).
- d. The anointing is "in the name of the Lord," which suggests something beyond the innate healing properties of the oil is involved.

7. The fact oil is probably not intended as medicine in this verse does not mean that it is wrong or unfaithful for Christians to use medicine when they are ill.

- a. Paul told Timothy in 1 Tim. 5:23 to use wine medicinally because of his stomach and his frequent illnesses. Part of the goodness of the good Samaritan in the Lord's parable in Luke 10 was that he poured oil and wine on the wounds of the man who had been beaten by robbers.
- b. The idea that God works through medicine is nothing new. In chapter 38 of Sirach (a.k.a. Ecclesiasticus), a second century B.C. Jewish writing that is part of the apocrypha (or deuterocanonical writings), it states: "Honor the physician with the honor due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him; . . . The Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them."

8. Verse 16 indicates that praying for the sick is not limited to the elders. The elders praying over the extremely ill is simply a specific case of healing prayer, which James generalizes in v. 16 into a principle of preventive medicine for the congregation. As Moo says, "His focus is no longer on the specific case that he mentioned in v. 14 (*Is any one of you sick?* . . .) but on the general need for the community to be involved regularly (the present tense of the imperative verb suggests this) in mutual confession and prayer as a way of treating cases of sickness that might arise." This shift from elders to believers in general shows that the healing power is in prayer, not in the elders.

9. Verse 15b shows that sickness *may be* related to sin. In other words, the person may be experiencing sickness because he is involved in sin.

In James the oil has no "immediately religious" or sacramental meaning--it's social and an expression of their faith. (It'd still be acceptable today to do this but it would be missing the point by following the text as if it were some religious procedure by which healing was assured.)

a. We know from the Book of Job and from Jesus (e.g., Jn. 9:2-3) that not *all* afflictions are the product of sin, but that connection remains a possibility (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:27-30 - discipline by illness over eating the Lord's Supper sinfully).

b. Where sickness is the result of sin, that sin will be forgiven upon the sinner's confession of the sin and prayer for forgiveness (in which he presumably joins with the elders or the community). The communal aspect -- the public confession and corporate prayer for forgiveness and healing -- may be necessitated by the fact the sin is being disciplined by the Lord. The "confession of sin" in 1 Jn. 1:9 does not specify that it be public (though many scholars think that is implied).

c. So if I become ill (or, for that matter, experience any hardship), I need to examine my life honestly to see if the Lord is disciplining me. If I have fallen into a sin, I need to confess that sin to the church that we may pray as a community for forgiveness and healing.

10. James says in v. 15 that "the prayer of faith *will* save the one who is ill, and the Lord *will* raise him up." Yet, we know that Paul prayed three times for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed but was not healed (2 Cor. 12:7-9). (Note that it was because of an illness that he first preached the gospel to the Galatians [Gal. 4:13-14].) And we know that he left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). Clearly it sometimes is not God's will to heal us physically. (The fact we all will die, unless the Lord returns before then, confirms the point.) So what's going on? How can James's apparently unconditional promise that God will heal one for whom the prayer of faith is offered be reconciled with the fact (from biblical testimony and personal experience) that God does not heal everyone for whom prayers are offered? Some possibilities:

a. It was understood that the "prayer of faith" includes an implied "not my will but yours be done." In other words, when James says God *will* heal, he means "assuming, of course, that it is God's will to do so." After all, it was James who just rebuked the wealthy believers for not recognizing that whether they lived or died certain things depended on the will of the Lord (4:13-16). While it is true that all prayers are subject to the sovereignty of God, it seems that James is saying more than simply the Lord *may* heal them if he chooses to do so. He seems to be assuring them that the Lord will heal them, at least normally.

b. James is promising his readers that God will (at least normally) heal them in response to their prayers, but this particular promise need not be extended beyond that time and group. It is certainly possible that the Spirit revealed to James God's intention to heal routinely in response to the prayers of James's audience, as part of God's public validation of the new Christian movement. God is sovereign, and he may have planned to work subsequently in a less striking fashion (i.e., healing less frequently), much as the work of the Spirit changed after he confirmed by miracles the divine nature of the church. (The key here is that Scripture itself suggests that the promise was not universal.)

c. Perhaps the "prayer of faith" to which James is referring is not just a prayer offered with confidence in God's existence, love, and supremacy, but a prayer offered with *divinely given* assurance that what one is asking is in fact within the will of the Lord (and thus will be granted -- 1 Jn. 5:14-15). In other words, it's a prayer of God-given confidence that the specific request will be granted rather than a prayer of confidence in God's general goodness and supremacy.

11. The power of prayer must not be underestimated. Elijah was a man, and look what God did in response to his prayers!

C. Encouragement to correct the erring (5:19-20)

1. James urges his readers to turn those who have wandered from the truth back to the right path, the right way of life. Those who had wandered into hostility, anger, favoritism, and various sins of division were in danger of condemnation.

2. If they are successful, they will deliver that erring brother from eternal death, covering (with atoning blood) a multitude of his sins.