



Study Series

James: Week Thirteen

Bible

James 5:12-20 (NIV)

12 Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.

The Prayer of Faith

13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. **14** Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. **15** And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they

have sinned, they will be forgiven.

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. **18** Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back,

20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Sermon Summary

As we come to the end of James' letter it is worth remembering that while we've taken our time (three months!), James' original congregation would have read the book in one sitting. It may have taken them an hour and a half to read it through, allowing heaps of time for questions, comments and discussion, but it would have all happened at one meeting. The obvious implication is that all of James' letter would have been in their short term memory, rather than their long term memory as it is for us. The themes of endurance in hardship, of wholeheartedness, of the power of words, the importance of our actions as an expression of our faith, and the dangers of wealth, would all be fresh in their hearts and minds as they came to the final thoughts of James' letter. This immediacy is important to remember as we look at these last few verses which, typically for James, seem to jump from topic to topic even at the end of the letter. However, even in these final verses, James has an important message for us to reflect on.

In verse 12 James appears to introduce a significant new topic "Above all..." he begins. This places what James has to say next about oaths as a critical topic, which appears strange. One verse at the end of a letter hardly seems to qualify for an "above all". The clue to understanding this seems to be the reflection in Jesus' teaching. Twice in Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks about oaths. In Matthew 23:16-22 he rebukes the teachers of the law for weaselling out of oaths on semantic loopholes and in Matthew 5:33-37 he says much the same thing. The issue is not making promises or exchanging vows at a wedding or swearing an oath in a court of law, but the integrity of a promise made to God or before God. In other words, Jesus is saying, let your "yes" be evident in your actions. This is right in line with James' emphasis on actions and provides a clue for us about the "above all". Remember that James is writing to a group of believers who are being tempted to give up on faith after having begun to follow Jesus. They have said "yes" to Jesus and James is urging them all to follow through on that commitment. You've said "yes", now all of you should live out that "yes". The corporate nature of this command is reflected in the next section on prayer.

There is plenty to discuss in this section, however, James is not providing nuanced teaching on prayer here but urging the community of faith to be praying for each other, and that this will bring physical and spiritual healing.

The confession of sins mentioned here may be linked quite specifically to the concerns raised in the letter. James encourages confession to each other about the various points he has raised, as well as prayer for each other to endure. Prayer is effective James says and leaves it at that (with no expansion, for example, about what happens when prayer for healing does not bring healing). We believe that prayer is effective and we continue to pray for each other even if we don't receive an answer or the answer we hope for.

Again, the emphasis on endurance and the interaction with the sins that James has raised for the community, may provide the key to understanding the example of Elijah which doesn't provide the neatest fit for the context (at least at first sight). The point of comparison for James is that Elijah was human, just like his readers and that he prayed and witnessed God's provision. For Elijah this came in the form of rain and crops. What is strange about this example is that in Kings, where the story is told, Elijah is not explicitly described as praying. On top of that it would seem that the context would demand a story of healing, like, for example, when Elijah raised a boy to life. But James does not highlight this. Instead, James' readers were likened to Elijah because they were experiencing hardship, and are therefore called to patiently endure and wait for the provision of God in the rains. Remember also, just 30 second previously, for James' original readers, they would have heard how they were to be patient like the farmer waiting for the rains so that the valuable crop would grow. Coincidence? Unlikely!

Finally, James concludes with a purpose statement. If one of you should wander away, the community should seek them out and restore them. This is what James has been trying to do with his original congregation, and what he wants them to do for each other. This suggests a perspective on salvation as a destination to be reached rather than a single moment. It also emphasises the corporate nature of salvation. James wants the whole group to arrive in the last days with no one left behind. It reminds me of the parable of the lost sheep where the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes to find the one. The thing is, we tend to stop where the story does: with the finding of the lost sheep and the rejoicing that comes with that. However, the point of finding the one was to restore that one to the rest of the flock. The shepherd was delighted to find the sheep, but more so to have the 100. Each of us are like that lost sheep, but we are brought back to the flock. James concludes his letter by calling the congregation to take responsibility for one another and to restore each other so that all of them might arrive at maturity and completeness. These are the final words of James and words that should encourage us to do the same.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Are you a person of your word? Do you follow through on the commitments you make, like praying for someone when you say you will? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read James chapter 5:12-20. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* it jumped out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. James is fairly matter of fact about expecting the miraculous work of God in prayer. Are you expectant for God to answer your prayers, and what might be at work to limit that expectation?
4. What might "confession of sins" look like in our church, and in your life? What keeps us from doing this?
5. Our culture can often be quite isolated or individualistic when it comes to matters of faith. How can we take greater responsibility for each other's walk with Jesus, and are we willing to take that up?
6. The letter of James repeatedly calls followers of Jesus to a higher standard of living, not by works, but by enduring faith, empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Take some time to discuss your own commitment to this call. Are you willing to personally engage with the sort of change James is calling for throughout this letter, to live you faith increasingly out loud? What are the barriers to this in your life?

Prayer

We follow Jesus, sustained by His Holy Spirit, but also encouraged by the community of faith. Take some time now to reflect on your answers to questions 6. Pray for each other, recognising God's call to encourage each other in living our faith increasingly out loud.