

James
Chapter Five
Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.
Begun August, 2005

Test X. The Test of Patient Endurance (5:1-11)

James 5:1 “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.

James 5:2 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.

James 5:3 Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!

James 5:4 Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

James 5:5 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

James 5:6 You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.”

Is this depressing or uplifting? Certainly these six verses are the strongest rebuke in James’ epistle. He strongly condemns those who profess to worship God but instead worship material possessions. Jesus clearly stated the problem here:

Luke 16:13 “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Jesus categorizes everyone as servants and that is certainly something that we cannot let pass our notice. We all are servants of something or someone. We just have to analyze ourselves and determine who or what is our master. It is impossible to thoroughly serve two masters as Jesus said. Serving Jesus has characteristics that cannot be matched by serving someone or something else.

Matt 6:19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

Matt 6:20 “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;

Matt 6:21 for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

If our earthly savings account is our treasure then we will also have our attitude thoroughly impressed in that direction. We will be constantly thinking about the value of our stocks and bonds or what else we think that we own. Another parable speaks to this same issue of where our thoughts are directed:

Luke 12:16 "And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive.

Luke 12:17 "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'

Luke 12:18 "And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

Luke 12:19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry."'

Luke 12:20 "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'

Luke 12:21 "So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."'

We have commented on this parable before but it is also very applicable in this study. There is nothing wrong with planning but if we are owned by our things then our thoughts will be constantly on how to best care for them and not on what spiritual treasures we should be attaining.

James is addressing these people in the second tense, which indicates that he is expecting these people to hear these words in a local church. Thus he is anticipating that in every church there will be people who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ but who in actuality are worshipers of mammon. This interpretation is consistent with the meaning of the epistle in that James is asking people to examine themselves to see where their loyalties really lie. In any time period the churches are not totally populated by saved people and this is the reason that we differentiate between the visible and the invisible church. The visible church is the group of people who belong to some organized religious group claiming to be Christian. The invisible church is the group of people who are indeed the chosen people of God.

As a result of these peoples' devotion to their wealth, they are facing a terrible fate as foretold also by Jesus:

Luke 6:24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.

Luke 6:25 "Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Luke 6:26 "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets."

Do any of us want to have received our total comfort in full here and to weep and mourn forever? I hope not. The Old Testament is also full of condemnation for those who worship their wealth in such verses as Isaiah 10:1-4, Amos 4:1-3, Job 24:2-4,

James 5:7 "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.

James 5:8 You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

James 5:9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.

James 5:10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

James 5:11 Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.”

Why is the Lord waiting to come again? Think about your son, grandson, or some other person that you love very much and who is not a Christian. Do you really want the Lord to come back before that person is saved? Certainly I would answer “no” and I would hope that you would also. Of course we do not know who is on the list of the chosen ones and when they will be physically born and then spiritually saved. But God does and He is waiting for the salvation of the last chosen one on His list.

James uses the farmer as an example of a person waiting for the processes to occur before the harvest comes. The example is very good because from what I said above we can see that the waiting of the Lord is because of His great mercy and love for all of the chosen people. Some day the last chosen person will be born again and then the end will be allowed to come. We do not know when that time will be but it will be in the perfect timing of God Who has set the end time from even before the beginning of time. The plan is perfect and God is in absolute, total, sovereign control. All we have to do is to trust and obey.

We also have the example of the prophets of old who waited and endured. We see through all of history how God has led His people and brought about the perfect timing of the life and death of Jesus. Two thousand years seems like a long time in our time thinking but God has the perfect plan and He will not lose a single person who He has ordained will become one of His children. When I try to think in terms of waiting for that last person to be physically born and then spiritually born again, then I am able to wait with considerably more patience. I also want all of God’s chosen children of all time to receive their salvation so the waiting is much easier. In fact the more that I am able to “wrap my mind” around the concept of waiting for the last of the chosen ones the less anxiety I have about the wait.

What I have to do, and what I want everyone who reads my writings to do, is to just live every day as though that is the day that He will return. When I put my focus on just trying to continually develop my sanctification and thus my obedience to my Lord I then have the peace that passes all earthly comprehension.

Phil 4:7 “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Test XI. The Test of Truthfulness (5:12)

James 5:12 “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.”

This part of this verse dealing with letting my yes be yes and my no be no has been a prayer of mine for some time. I certainly do not always pass this test any more than I pass other tests but I have been especially pressed by God to obey this test lately. Even in simple everyday events I need to always let my yes be yes and my no be no. If I tell someone that I will call them Monday morning then I either need to call them or quickly let them know what emergency caused me to not keep my word. Our word is very important and represents our commitment to people. Many times people have let me down in this regard and, even though I am not usually surprised when others do not keep this command, I am still disappointed.

People are inherently liars and the reason is simple:

John 8:44 “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies.”

From the time of our birth until our rebirth we served Satan and his basic character was also our basic character. Even Christians still have that tendency because we are still struggling with our sanctification.

This test has often been misinterpreted and some people have refused to take the oath on a legal witness stand because they think that this verse is telling them not to swear an oath of truth. But this is not what it is telling us. This verse is telling us that our word is so very important a reflection of who we are and what we believe that we only need to give our word and, except for a dire emergency, anyone can count on us to be a person of his word.

Test XII. The Test of Prayerfulness (5:13-18)

James 5:13 “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises.

James 5:14 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;

James 5:15 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.

James 5:16 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.

James 5:17 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.

James 5:18 And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.”

Now we are in another area of controversy. We have to be very careful before proceeding with this application. Here he is addressing those who are suffering so the first question to ask is “what is the nature of this suffering?” This translation is from the Greek word “kakopothēio” and it means those who are suffering spiritually and emotionally. Context also sends us back to the beginning of this epistle to see that James is addressing the twelve tribes who have been scattered and are suffering various trials. These people were Jews and Christians and suffered considerably for their faith. He tells us what we are to do when we are suffering for our faith and that is to pray. In verse 13 James tells those suffering to pray for grace to endure and for those who are cheerful to sing praises to the Lord.

We should next ask what is the meaning of the word translated “sick” in verse 14. The Greek word is “astheneo” and it is translated 18 times in the New Testament as sick and 14 times to refer to someone having emotional or spiritual weakness. Paul used the word in the following:

2Cor 12:10 “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

In the above verse the same word is translated “weaknesses” and refers to emotional and spiritual symptoms produced by the sufferings of life: insults, distresses, persecutions, and with difficulties but all for the sake of Jesus Christ. The context used by Paul is the same as that used by James as we saw at the beginning of this epistle. Translating the word “weak” gives us a totally different understanding of what James is telling us. He is speaking of the Jewish Christians who have suffered at the hands of people prosecuting them and they have become spiritually depressed. They are weak as a result of all the trauma received because of their love for Christ and need the help of other brothers and sisters to pray for and with them. Certainly this interpretation is proper in the context of this epistle and in the context of other teachings by other Apostles.

James is telling these people to call the elders to pray for them and to anoint them with oil as a symbol of the grace of God to His children in need. He goes on to remind them that the prayers of a faithful person can accomplish much and even restore them to the joy of their first love of Christ. Even if some of these Christians committed sins while in their depressed state, they are told that God is faithful to forgive them of their sins. It may even be that they committed sins that resulted in some physical ailments and, if so, the forgiving of the sins will help to remove the consequences of the sin. Having a prayer partner and a close brother or sister with whom one can confess sins is a very effective way to help us leave behind our sins and never succumb to them again.

The Greek word translated anoint, “aleipho”, is never used to indicate a ceremonial act but means to literally rub in the oil as on a wound. James is telling the people that the oil can be used as a medicine to heal the bruises and tired muscles of the people who were beaten or made to work under terrible conditions by the people who were persecuting them.

I believe the way we have approached this text is within the context of the epistle and of the entire New Testament. This approach gives us a proper interpretation for application in our lives and in the lives of our brothers and sisters who endure pain and criticism because they are followers of Jesus Christ. This interpretation also helps keep us away from an improper use of God’s word.

While we are on the topic of prayer, let us also examine why we pray. Certainly we are to pray because God tells us to pray and certainly God uses our prayers. But we must be certain to understand that prayer does not change God’s mind. There are only two reasons why anyone would change their mind:

- 1.) We bring new information to that person that had not been considered in the decision process.
- 2.) The person made a mistake in the original decision.

Now it is ludicrous to think that either of these possibilities applies to God! It is true that some Scripture seems to indicate that God changes His mind or repents as we think of the word “repent”, but that understanding of the role of God in the universe is not consistent with the rest of Scripture concerning the character of God. The reason we are to pray for healing or for any other request is so that when God does what He was going to do anyway we can give Him all the glory for His actions in our world.

Regarding the subject of physical healing, one of the best books that I have ever read on the subject is reference 6 below. It is very well balanced and presents a thorough treatment of this subject. I highly recommend it for your reading. It has a very good foreword by Joni Eareckson who was not physically healed by God. The book also has a very strong endorsement by one of my favorite Bible interpreters Dr. D. W. Lloyd-Jones and that is enough to make anyone want to read it. Dr. Lloyd-Jones ends his endorsement with “I strongly recommend this most valuable study”. The book is only 125 pages long and rather easy reading. So please make this book a must reading for you.

Test XIII. The Test of True Faith (5:19-20)

James 5:19 “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back,

James 5:20 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.”

What a wonderful promise and encouragement for us to watch over our brothers and sisters in Christ so that we might be able to help anyone of us who has strayed from the

truth. Of course we have to be very careful of our “meddling”. We might be the ones who are wrong and have strayed rather than the one we are observing. We must always be careful to watch out for the log in our eye:

Matt 7:3 “And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

Matt 7:4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye?”

Matt 7:5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”

The possibility of helping someone – or ourselves – is a wonderful incentive for us to press on with our watching of other Christians.

James is certainly speaking to us of professing Christians in our fellowship who are really not regenerate people. The word he uses for sinners is never used of regenerate people. He first uses the word “brethren” to refer to members of the invisible church. He then says “if any among you strays from the truth”, which refers to the unregenerate people in the fellowship who have noticeably departed from the life of a Christian. Certainly all of us sin but the life of a true Christian is not depicted by a continual life of sin. When a true child of God sins, he is immediately pricked in his soul and must repent. James is telling us to watch for a person in our fellowship who has truly turned his back on practicing the Christian life style. When we see someone in our fellowship practicing sin we should go to him and talk lovingly to him about his lifestyle and see if the Spirit of God will work in the life of that person to work the gift of regeneration. If the person is truly a chosen person then we may be blessed to witness regeneration and a complete change of action in the life of the person. If indeed such happens then all of the many sins that the person had committed and would have committed will be placed into the account of Jesus and the righteousness of Christ will be put into the account of the sinner.

1John 1:8 “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

If the person does not repent then he may leave our fellowship:

1John 2:19 “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.”

Praise God for this wonderful epistle that helps the children of God live a life of righteousness and that helps us to be involved somewhat in the work of God to save people in our fellowship who were not children of God. The ending of this epistle is certainly appropriate to the purpose given to James by the Father.

References

1. All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Moody Press, 1975.
2. John MacArthur, "The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James", Moody Press/Chicago, 1998.
3. Geoffrey W. Bromley, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume II, Erdmans Publishing Company, 1982.
4. Frank E. Gaebelin, "The Expositor's Bible Commentary", Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.
5. David P. Scaer, "James the Apostle of FAITH", Corcordia Publishing House, 1983.
6. Henry W. frost, "Miraculous Healing", Zondervan Publishing House, 1979.