

Save His Soul From Death  
James 5:7-20  
March 17, 2024  
Rev. Dave Dorst  
CenterPoint Church

Read James 5:7-20

*“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)*

## **Introduction**

A man named Michael Cheshire wrote an article a while back where he talked about a conversation that he, a Christian, had with an atheist friend that he had been witnessing to over lunch. It was shortly after the pastor Ted Haggard had his big scandal that involved a male prostitute and drugs. The TV in the restaurant had a news show on talking about the scandal, so his friend pointed to the TV and said, “That is the reason I will not become a Christian. Many of the things you say make sense, Mike, but that’s what keeps me away.” Mike immediately said, “Hey man, not all of us do things like that.” He laughed and said, “You’re proving my point. That guy said sorry a long time ago. Even his wife and kids stayed and forgave him, but all you Christians still hate him. You guys can’t forgive him... Every time you talk to me about God, you explain that he will take me as I am. You say he forgives all my failures and will restore my hope, and as long as I stay outside the church, you say God wants to forgive me. But that guy failed while he was one of you, and most of you are still vicious to him. You Christians eat your own. Always have, always will.”<sup>1</sup>

Ouch. I don’t know about you, but that kind of rebuke causes some soul-searching for me: do I do that? I’ve heard it said that the Christian army is the only one that shoots its own wounded. I don’t really believe that’s true, because you see people turn on others within their own groups and camps easily. But perhaps it hurts the most when Christians are unwilling to forgive one another or help their fellow brother or sister have a second chance. That doesn’t always mean placing them back in the position they were in before, as trust is rebuilt over time. But it does mean that we Christians need to take seriously the fact that we are a body that is knit together with Christ as the head. And that comes with a lot of responsibility that we take for one another. In our passage today, James reminds us of some of the ways that redeemed believers are to live and act towards one another. We are to be patient with each other, speak truth to one another, bear one another’s burdens, pray for one another, and pursue those who have wandered from the truth.

The first six verses remind us that we should be

### **I. A Community That Demonstrates Patience and Truth (vv. 7-12)**

*<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. <sup>12</sup> But above all, 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.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Cheshire, “Going to Hell with Ted Haggard,” found at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/december-online-only/going-to-hell-with-ted-haggard.html>

James said in the last chapter that our lives are like a vapor, a mist gone quickly. And yet, the irony is that they can also feel long and arduous. James mentions patience four times and being steadfast twice in these six verses. How long do we need to be patient? Until we go to be with the Lord or until He returns for us. I think James is addressing what Jesus was teaching with parables like the one in Luke 12 where the servants who were awake and ready when the master returned were considered blessed. We are to be faithful and obedient in the long time that we wait for His return, even when it's easy to get discouraged and start grumbling about those around us. James says, "*establish your hearts,*" in other words, make sure that your heart is fixed in the right things. We often grumble about or against other people, and too often those people are our fellow believers, as verse 9 mentions. Ray Ortland said this:

"The beautiful "one another" commands of the New Testament are famous. But it is also striking to notice the "one anothers" that do *not* appear there. For example, sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, marginalize one another, exclude one another, judge one another, run one another's lives, confess one another's sins."<sup>2</sup>

If you've never been part of a power struggle or a clash of personalities in a church, stick around, they happen all the time. When we lose sight of our mission to be salt and light in the world, it's easy to lash out at one another and get upset about the things that shouldn't matter as much.

Three examples for us to consider:

1) James says look at the farmers who have to wait for two seasons of rain before they harvest their crops; there's nothing that they can do to speed up the rain or make it happen when there's a drought. We don't know when the Lord will come back or when He'll call us home, but we wait patiently and expectantly.

2) We are to look at the prophets as excellent examples of those who remained steadfast. Jeremiah, for example, was beaten, put in stocks, and thrown in a muddy pit while everyone basically ignored his dire God-given prophecies. Yet he remained faithful in the midst of it all.

3) Job lost everything but refused to curse or blame God. Yes, he brought his complaint before God, but it was born out of faith. Believers can expect to suffer, but we are also given the strength to endure through that suffering.

Verse 12 seems like it's shoved in here and maybe doesn't fit, but it's a reminder that the people of God should also be people of the truth. It is very similar to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:34-37:

*"But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply, 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."*

The main point is that we should be known for being honest. We should not need an oath or to swear that we're telling the truth if we are trustworthy. I don't believe, like some Christians traditions such as the Quakers, that this forbids us from taking an oath of office or being sworn in at court or things like that. This is the normal course of your daily life – if you say you'll do something, do it; if you say something is true, it's because you are sure and certain.<sup>3</sup> If you have to add "I swear to high heaven that I will not let you down," you are already indicating that you can't normally be trusted to do what you say you'll do. Let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No" and be true to your word. We should expect nothing less of people who desire to be Christlike.

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/one-anothers-i-cant-find-in-the-new-testament-2/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/one-anothers-i-cant-find-in-the-new-testament-2/)

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 174.

Our next six verses direct us to be

## **II. A Community That Shares the Burdens of Sin and Suffering (vv. 13-18)**

*<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

I think we need to see here that what James is saying is that our first response to things should be spiritual, turning to the Lord. Are you suffering? Then pray. Are you happy? Sing praises. Are you extremely sick? Call for the elders and have them pray. Turning to the Lord, the great Physician, should not be the last resort; He should be the first one that we go to about our circumstances. Even though we cannot guarantee that someone will be healed, it's always possible that God will work healing through prayer. This definitely does not tell us that we should ignore medical professionals; we don't take the extreme position of some denominations and cults that say that you don't use modern medicine. And we don't join the prosperity teachers who say that it's a lack of faith that keeps you from being healed, that so often doubles the misery of a sick, hurting person. Additionally, we don't assume that all sickness is caused by sin. There is the *possibility* that the person's sin has caused their sickness, and so when sickness comes, perhaps use it as a sanctifying tool: If sins come to mind, spend some time confessing them and endeavoring to change.<sup>4</sup>

Verse 16 has been used as part of the justification for setting up the priestly confessional in the Catholic church. To see this as requiring the lay people to confess to a priest is reading a whole lot into that verse, especially when that priest is the one who acts as a mediator between God and His people. There is only one mediator, 1 Timothy 2:5 says, Jesus Christ. This verse does **not** say "confess your sins to your church leaders so that they will pardon you," it says "*confess... to one another and pray for one another.*" It's the beautiful recommendation that your fellow Christian who lives in community with you and worships with you is a wonderful person to help you pray through your sin and suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic book *Life Together* says this: "Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him."<sup>5</sup> What did Adam and Eve do as soon as they sinned? They hid. That's our natural tendency too – hide from God and from others. But we should do the opposite: run to God and seek support from one another.

There are a lot of ways to put this verse into practice, and many Christian men and women have "accountability partners" or form "accountability groups" that provide a safe place to confess your sins and pray for one another. I've heard people be very skeptical of these groups, a youth pastor I heard once said, "I don't believe in accountability groups because if you can cheat on your wife, you can easily lie about it to your buddies." And that's probably true, and no structure or system is perfect. But many believers, me included, have found wonderful support from fellow believers in admitting our sins and weaknesses and asking for prayer and support. Sam Allberry reminds us that if we are going to live out this confessing to one another, that we

---

<sup>4</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 112.

“need to be those to whom others would feel able to confess sins. It is worth asking yourself: are you someone others would find approachable? Are you known to be trustworthy and sensitive? Would a good friend at church be wise to share a painful and shameful sin with you? Would you know how to respond, and how to pray for them; or would you excuse or belittle the sin, or condemn the confessor?”<sup>6</sup>

The end of verse 16, “*the prayer of a righteous person has great power*” is a wonderful reminder that prayer offered up by a Christian saved by grace (for that is the only way we become righteous) is heard by God and can change much. Elijah is the example given in the next two verses – back in 1 Kings 18 his prayers both made it not rain for three and a half years, and then made the rains come again after his showdown and slaughter of Baal’s priests. In case we think that we can never be like Elijah because he was a prophet and super-spiritual, James says in verse 17 that he had a nature just like ours. He was just a regular, flesh-and-blood human being like you and me. There is no difference between Elijah and us when it comes to prayer, God hears our prayers just as loud and clear as He heard His prophets’ prayers. Peter Davids said that, “prayer is not *itself* powerful; it is not magic. But its power is unlimited in that the child of God calls on a Father of unlimited goodness and ability.”<sup>7</sup>

The last two verses urge us to be

### **III. A Community That Cares for the Wayward (vv. 19-20)**

*<sup>19</sup> My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> 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.*

After dealing with all the things that James has dealt with in this letter, his last closing thought is of those who have wandered from the truth. After all the teaching on faith and works, the misuse of the tongue, the love of money, he knows that the worst thing that can happen is that someone wanders away from the faith. And he reminds his readers and every Christian through the ages that it is a high calling and a beautiful thing to help bring someone back from their wandering. I don’t know about you, but that is usually a difficult challenge. Is it hard to know what to say to those who have walked away from the church and Jesus. I think back over my decades of ministry and remember the lunches, the conversations with people who had left the church and the faith. Some of them were kids who went through my youth ministry but never truly owned their faith, others were adults who had been active members, even Sunday School teachers. But they either loved the things of the world more than Jesus, or they became disillusioned with the church, or they simply couldn’t accept the tenets of the Bible that didn’t make sense to them. A lot of times, they don’t even want to talk to me, other times they are evasive; rarely do I say the perfect thing that connects with them and brings them back to church with a smile. Often, it’s easier to share my faith with unbelievers who have never heard the gospel than to share with people who were part of the church and have now rejected it. But we should be ready to walk alongside and talk to anyone that we see who is wandering from the faith. I know that the text says “*whoever brings back a sinner... will save his soul from death,” and that makes it sound like we do all the work. But I find great solace in the fact that only the Holy Spirit can change a heart. That should never excuse us from acting, but it takes the burden off of us to “make it happen.”*

---

<sup>6</sup> Sam Allberry, *James For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), p. 155.

<sup>7</sup> Peter H. Davids, *James* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1995), p. 125.

One of the biggest issues in the past few decades in the church has been the pain of Christian parents whose children have rejected their faith. I've seen it over and over again in the families of our friends. Homeschooled, private Christian schooled, public schooled, I've seen kids from every situation desert the faith. Sometimes the parents remain very hopeful, other times it wrecks them, they bear guilt, especially the ones that thought they did "everything right" – they had family devotions, shared the gospel with their kids, tried to live consistent, godly lives themselves. We have the Proverb that if we train up a child in the way that he should go, when he is old he will not depart. So, what happened, why didn't that work? The bottom line is that God has to do a supernatural work in every person's heart, whether they grew up on the streets with drug addicts for parents, or whether their dad was Billy Graham. You probably know that Billy Graham's son, Franklin, lived a prodigal life for many years before embracing his faith.

Nick Batzig is a PCA pastor in South Carolina who was a rebellious church kid growing up. His parents were very godly, but he rejected the faith, plunged deeply into the drug and party culture, embodying the "wandering sinner" from verses 19-20. But his parents persevered through his rebellious years and eventually the Lord changed his heart and he responded to the gospel. So he has a unique perspective that I don't when it comes to giving advice for parents who are dealing with wandering children, having been one himself. In an article titled "Hope When Your Children Stray," he gives five recommendations for parents of a rebellious child.

- 1) Pray explicitly and incessantly for your child's salvation. You must ground all of your efforts in prayer, God is the only One who will can truly save them.
- 2) Pray that God will surround your children with other Christians. Nick says that his parents prayed that for him and he found himself not only working around outspoken Christians, but one time that he was in a bar and a biker started talking about Jesus to him and prayed over him in front of his friends.
- 3) Pray that God will do whatever it takes to deliver your child. Maybe they have to hit rock bottom, you need to be OK with that. Nick says, "Better to have redeemed children who've suffered hardship than healthy and prosperous children who perish eternally."
- 4) Pursue your children with God's word. Nick's dad would read Scripture to him, not to beat him down with guilt, but to remind him that he was spiritually and eternally lost. His parents would also write letters filled with Scripture that some kids might ignore or tear up, but that Nick cherished.
- 5) Be loving yet firm with your children. Speak the truth in love.<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

James and all of the New Testament writers remind us that when God calls us out of our sin and darkness into His glorious light of salvation, that He also joins us to a body. The body of Christ, the church. We are part of the church universal, all of the believers throughout time and all over the world; but just as important, God wants us to connect and live life with a local body of believers. This body of believers is not just a social club, it doesn't just gather one day a week to sing a few songs, read a few verses, and then be on our way, free to set all of that aside until the same time next week. That certainly beats the CEOs (the Christian and Easter only church attenders), but James says that living in community and investing in one another's lives holds such deeper and richer rewards. We support one another and help us hold on to our faith through a lifetime when it's easy to get discouraged, impatient, and wander away.

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hope-when-your-children-stray/>

I've heard that men can be so superficial that they are able to spend four hours playing golf together and never learn each other's last names or anything about each other's families. And that can be true, I've experienced those conversations. And sometimes we keep things superficial in the church. But let's dare to go deeper, let's look for ways to cut through the facades and really find out what people are wrestling with. They have to trust you to do that, so let us be people who love unconditionally and are worthy of other's trust. Let us pray for each other, let us bear one another's burdens, and remind each other of the gospel promises that Jesus is our great Savior and heaven awaits those who are united to Him by faith. Apart from the saving work of Jesus, we are spiritually dead in our sins, separated from a holy God. If we die with our sin still counted against us, we face eternal condemnation. As the song we sang earlier ("All I Have is Christ") said,

"I once was lost in darkness night, yet thought I knew the way. The sin that promised life and joy had led me to the grave... You looked upon my helpless state and led me to the cross. I beheld God's love displayed, you suffered in my place; You bore the wrath reserved for me, now all I know is grace. Hallelujah, all I have is Christ."

That's true in one sense - Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is all we have to save our souls and grant us eternal life. But in another sense, we have one another, beautiful gifts from God that help us live out our Christian lives through the times of joy and through the times of suffering, sickness, and trials. And all those who are so glad to be surrounded by supportive, loving brothers and sisters in Christ said, "Amen."

**Benediction: St. Patrick's Prayer**

May the Strength of God pilot us.    May the Power of God preserve us.  
May the Wisdom of God instruct us.    May the Hand of God protect us.  
May the Way of God direct us.    May the Shield of God defend us.  
May the Angels of God guard us  
Against the snares of the evil ones, Against temptations of the world.  
May Christ be with us!    May Christ be before us!    May Christ be in us,  
Christ be over all!    May Thy Grace, Lord,    Always be ours,  
This day, O Lord, and forevermore. Amen.