

Keep Your Word and Pray with Righteousness (James 5:12-20)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. We have come to the final section of the letter of **James**.
- b. The passage we will study today is from the second half of **James 5**. After addressing the importance of having patient endurance, he concludes by speaking about the following topics, all of which are related to living a righteous life:
 - i. Letting your 'yes' be 'yes' (not swearing, showing integrity).
 - ii. What a Christian should do when they are suffering or sick (or happy).
 - iii. Confessing sins to one another.
 - iv. The effectiveness of the prayer of the righteous.
 - v. The blessing of turning a sinner from his sinful ways.

II. Do Not Swear / Let Your 'Yes' be 'Yes'

- a. Read **James 5:12**.
 - i. "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,' lest you fall into judgment." (**James 5:12**, NKJV)
- b. Here, James is reminding the Christians of something Jesus Himself taught, in the Sermon on the Mount.
 - i. "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." (**Matthew 5:33-37**, NKJV)
 - ii. Jesus had taught, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, that the righteousness of his followers had to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. (**Matthew 5:20**) And it was a higher standard than the

one handed down by Moses (which, in this area, simply called people to keep their oaths when they swore to the Lord).

1. Jesus altogether prohibited swearing (where the person swearing would emphasize that this time, he or she *really meant* something they said).
 2. Instead, He said His followers would have to keep their word all the time, whenever they opened their mouths!
 3. From this point forward, swearing about something or not keeping one's word would be considered to be "from the devil".
- iii. This is an extremely hard teaching. This is the highest standard of righteousness: always telling the truth and always keeping your commitments, to the very best of your ability.
1. Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology* written c. 160 A.D. to the Roman rulers and philosophers, took this teaching of Jesus seriously. He remarked that this distinctive trait of the Christians (their honesty) was one of the things that persuaded pagans to embrace the Christian faith. Justin wrote:
 - a. "[writing to Roman pagans] The fact that *we actually follow His teachings* is demonstrated by the many Christians who once followed your way of thinking. ...Some of them were won to Christianity by the *righteousness they observed* in the life of their Christian neighbors...Still others were attracted by the *honesty of the Christians* with whom they transacted business."
 - i. (Source of the above quote: Justin Martyr, *We Don't Just Speak Great Things, We Live Them*, part 2, chapter 3, p. 83)
 - ii. (For original form of the quote, see Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 16; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 168)
- iv. Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 195 A.D., explained how Christians should train themselves for righteousness with the dedication of an athlete training for a competition. He wrote:
1. "Accordingly, love makes its own athlete fearless and dauntless, and confident in the Lord, anointing and training him; as righteousness secures for him truthfulness in his whole life. For it was a *compendium of righteousness* to say, 'Let your yes be yes; and your no, no.'"

- a. [Note: A '*compendium*' refers to a brief collection that summarizes a much larger body of material.]
 - b. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, book 7, chapter 11; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 542)
- v. **Questions:** Would the people here in Boston say the same thing about Christians today? Would they say the same thing about *the Christians in our group*?
 - 1. Jesus said that we are the light of the world, and that light should shine before all men, that they would see our good works and glorify the Father in heaven. (**Matthew 5:14-16**)
- vi. **Personal Challenge:** Do you keep your commitments all the time? Do you have a well-earned reputation for that? Or are you known as someone who makes plenty of nice promises (to make others happy at the time) but cannot be counted on to keep them?
 - 1. While some may be attracted to the 'Historic Faith' because of a desire to follow practices that many modern Christians have abandoned or explained away, what about this very simple teaching?
 - a. In my opinion, it is one of the hardest teachings of Jesus to keep!
 - b. Do you keep your word? Do you do what you say and keep your commitments to your spouse, your children, and friends? To business associates, clients, and those who work with or for you?
 - c. Is what you say, "as good as gold"? Can people count on you? To do what you say *when you said you would do it*?
 - i. Do you make commitments or promises to make other people happy, but which you know in your heart you likely cannot keep?
 - ii. When you find yourself in a situation where you have made a commitment that you will be unable to keep, and you are "ensnared by what you said," do you immediately do what it says in **Proverbs 6:1-6**, to proceed quickly to ask for a reprieve?
 - 2. Be extremely cautious regarding any commitments you make!

3. Show your faith through your absolute integrity in keeping your word to everyone.
 - a. Every day, this is one of the hardest challenges I face in life!

III. Mostly on Prayer

- a. Read **James 5:13-18**.
 - i. This passage begins with three opening questions, each with its own answer.
 1. Is anyone suffering? Let him pray.
 2. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.
 3. Is anyone among you sick? Get the elders to pray over him and anoint him with oil.
 - ii. Regarding those who are cheerful.
 1. Sing psalms!
 2. The **Psalms** are God's songbook. Many focus on praise or giving thanks to God.
 3. Times of happiness can draw Christians either closer to (giving thanks and singing psalms to God) or farther away (becoming lukewarm, self-sufficient, like the third soil being choked out by the thorns of idleness, leisure, living for pleasure and worldliness).
 - a. Satan will try to exploit either happy or suffering times in our lives!
 - iii. Regarding those who are suffering or sick, prayer to God is the first remedy.
 - iv. Let us consider the life of James, who is giving us instruction on the importance of prayer and the keys to effective prayer.
 1. Traditionally, it has been understood from early times that the 'James' who wrote this letter was the same James who was the bishop leading the church in Jerusalem, also the half-brother of Jesus.
 - a. This is the same James who was prominently referred to in the New Testament, in **Matthew 13:55**, **Acts 15:13 & 21:18**, and **Galatians 2:9-12**.

2. From early Christian chronicler Hegesippus, writing c. 170 A.D. (later preserved by Eusebius):
 - a. *"James, the Lord's brother, succeeds to the government of the Church, in conjunction with the apostles. He has been universally called the Just, from the days of the Lord down to the present time. For many bore the name of James; but this one was holy from his mother's womb.*
 - b. *"...He alone, I say, was wont to go into the temple: and he used to be found kneeling on his knees, begging forgiveness for the people—so that the skin of his knees became horny like that of a camel's, by reason of his constantly bending the knee in adoration to God, and begging forgiveness for the people. Therefore, in consequence of his pre-eminent justice, he was called the Just..."*
 - i. (Source: Hegesippus, *Fragments from His Five Books of Commentaries on the Acts of the Church*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 8, p. 762)
 - ii. Note that James had a reputation for his righteous way of life and his great devotion to prayer on his knees (which earned him the nickname, "Old Camel Knees").
 - iii. For additional early Christian references to this James, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, entry on 'James, Brother of the Lord'.
3. In view of James' unusual way of life, showing great devotion to both personal righteousness and prayer for the saints, let us heed his admonitions regarding prayer.
 - a. He speaks from a position of authority on these matters, based on his life!
- v. James' instructions regarding those who are sick:
 1. Ask the elders of the church to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.
 2. The prayer of faith will "save" the sick person.

3. The Greek word translated “save” here could be used to refer either to *the salvation of someone’s soul* or to a person being *saved (healed) from their physical infirmity*.
 4. The Lord will “raise up” the one who is sick.
 - a. The word “raise up” can refer to someone physically standing up, or to being resurrected from the dead on the Last Day.
 5. “And if he has sinned, he will be forgiven”
- vi. I still have a few questions regarding what James is explaining here. However, I have not found much in the earliest church writings that could shed more light on this practice.
1. Is this about anointing someone who is sick *in preparation for death*? Or is it about *healing someone from their physical sickness*? Or both?
 - a. The part about his sins being forgiven sounds to me like preparation for death is at least part of what this is about.
 2. How should we put this into practice today?
 - a. There have been a few cases where we have been asked by members of the church to do this.
- b. There are two “one another” commands here.
- i. Confess your sins *to one another*.
 - ii. *Pray for one another*, that you may be healed.
- c. On confessing our sins to one another.
- i. James, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us explicitly to do that.
 1. **Questions:** Do you do this? Do you confess your sins to another Christian? If so, is this a regular spiritual practice for you?
 - ii. **Question:** Is there anywhere else in the New Testament where we are told to confess our sins after we have become Christians?
 1. “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that *God is light* and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in

darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But *if we walk in the light* as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” (1 John 1:5–10, NKJV)

- a. Here, John explains that we are in a battle between light and darkness (similar to what Jesus taught in **John 3:19-21**). We need to walk in the light. Admit it when we sin, and confess our sins. He says, “*IF* we confess our sins,” He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness.
 - i. This is addressed to people who are already Christians. We need to continue to walk in the light. When we sin, we need to confess our sins.
 - ii. Here, John is not specific regarding whether we should confess our sins just to God, or confess them to “one another” as James stated.
2. This is about light versus darkness. Do we come into the light (and expose our sin), or remain in the darkness (and hide it)?
 - a. Sunlight is a wonderful disinfectant (killing *mold spores and harmful bacteria* in the physical realm...or *sin* in the spiritual one).
 - i. In my profession of environmental engineering, we use UV light (artificially recreating what sunlight does) as the final step to treat drinking water or wastewater, to disinfect it.
3. Practical things regarding confessing sin to one another.
 - a. First, make sure to do it. Make it a part of your spiritual life.
 - b. Essential to do it with someone you trust. Trust is absolutely essential to keep confidentiality and to give you the freedom to be completely open and real.
 - c. Always stay connected with another Christian you trust, who is mature. Use the phone if distance is an issue.

Wherever you are in the world, including business travel.

- d. If you are subject to a besetting sin you are struggling to break free from, by all means, confess your sins more frequently. As often as necessary. Do whatever it takes.
- e. Remember that Satan does NOT want you to come into the light. He wants to enslave you, bringing you into darkness and keeping you hiding out there!
- d. The prayer of the righteous.
 - i. "...The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (**James 5:16**, NKJV)
 - 1. "...The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (**James 5:16**, ESV)
 - 2. "...The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (**James 5:16**, NRSV)
 - a. [NOTE: While NKJV says "man" and ESV says "person", actually in Greek it just says, "the prayer of the righteous" or "of the righteous one".]
 - ii. James points to the example of Elijah, a righteous man, whose prayers stopped it from raining for 3-1/2 years. Again he prayed, and "the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit."
 - 1. This points to the story in **1 Kings:17-18** (found in **3 Kingdoms** in the LXX).
 - 2. Elijah announced to wicked king Ahab, "...As the Lord God of Hosts lives, the God of all Israel before whom I stand, there shall not be any dew or rain during these years except at my word." (**1 Kings 17:1**, LXX, OSB)
 - 3. Read **1 Kings 18:41-46**.
 - a. Elijah prays, and his servant goes and looks seven times, until black clouds arise, leading to a heavy downpour.
 - iii. James' teaching on the principles of prayer, to this point, included:
 - 1. Pray for wisdom, and ask without doubting (**James 1:5-6**)
 - 2. "You do not have because you do not ask..." (**James 4:3**)

3. "...when you ask you do not receive, because you ask that you may spend it on your pleasures...." (**James 4:3**)
- iv. James now caps off his teaching about the principles of effective prayer, pointing to the example of Elijah.
 1. He does NOT say the key to effective prayer is many words, eloquent speech, using special words, or invoking the name of Jesus or the Father using a certain prayer formula. Nor using candles, incense, robes, special pictures or statues, nor doing it in certain special locations. Nor is it based on the number of people praying for something.
 2. God answers the prayers *of the righteous*.
 3. Millions of people pray. If we want to have effective prayers, the most important thing is for a Christian to be making their appeal from the position of a righteous (not flawless) life.
- v. Examples of this principle (God listening to the prayers of the righteous) are throughout Scripture. For example:
 1. Jesus' own example of prayer.
 - a. "[Jesus] who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and *was heard because of His godly fear....*" (**Hebrews 5:7**, NKJV)
 - b. From other translations:
 - i. "...he was heard *because of his reverent submission....*" (**Hebrews 5:7**, NRSV)
 - ii. "...He was heard *because of His piety....*" (**Hebrews 5:7**, NASB95)
 - c. The point made here: Jesus' prayers were heard (by the Father) *because of Jesus' godly way of life*.
 2. Peter explained to husbands that if they don't live in an understanding way with their wives, their prayers will be hindered. The Lord will not listen to them. Peter bases that conclusion on a timeless principle that applies to all of us, as David explains in **Psalms 33/34**.
 - a. "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the

weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

- b. “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For
- c. “He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. *For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.*” (1 Peter 3:7-12, NKJV; with Peter quoting from Psalm 33/34:12-16)
 - i. Both Peter and James explained that the Lord listens to the prayers of the righteous. In contrast, He does *not* heed those who are doing evil!
3. Consider what it says in **Isaiah 58:5-12**, where it explains that to be effective, fasting *must be accompanied by righteousness*.
4. From the Deuterocanonical book of **Tobit**, in **chapter 12**, the angel Raphael (one of those who bring the prayers of the people before the Lord) says: “*A few prayers with righteousness are better than many with wrongdoing.*” (**Tobit 12:8**)
- vi. **Simple Challenge:** If you want God to listen to your prayers, you need to be committed to living a righteous life.
 1. How you treat your wife (or husband)
 2. If you are living according to all the righteous principles explained by Jesus and James (obeying Jesus’ commands; loving others as yourself; keeping yourself from being polluted by the world; visiting widows and orphans; controlling your tongue; not gossiping, slander or judging others; keeping your word; speaking the truth always; etc.)

IV. Rescue Those Who Wander

- a. “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way

will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” (**James 5:19–20**, NKJV)

- i. Have the heart of a good shepherd. Be on the lookout for sheep who have wandered away. Go out of your way to love them and to encourage them to return to the Lord!
- ii. This is a wonderful blessing and encouragement offered to all of us, to close the letter of James!