James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Thirteen

Bring Them Back

Honest Words, Constant Prayer, and the Brother Who Wanders

James 5:12–20

Good evening! Today we are finishing up our study in the book of James. It's been a doozy of a series. James spends four chapters calling out the double-mindedness and half-hearted devotion that his audience is operating in. Though they are in real trials, they have found themselves in real compromise. Their faith had been tested by the fire of trial and found to be impure.

Four chapters of being clear, not mincing words, and giving examples of how that double-mindedness (believing one thing and living another) shows up in day-to-day life. One of the primary ways it shows up is in how they treat one another and how they speak about one another. That leads to the ultimate conclusion: their compromise has made them friends with the world, and therefore enemies of God. But there is still time. Still time to repent. Still time to humble themselves and turn away from their willful compromise. James explains to these first-century Christians what that would actually look like. They were to draw near to God, resist the devil, cleanse their hands, purify their hearts, grieve over their sin, and stop speaking evil of one another. He then promises grace to those who humble themselves and submit to God, and opposition to those who meet God with pride.

Then in chapter five, he begins pronouncing judgment on the world and the people around them who are likely bringing the oppression and trial mentioned in chapter one. God promises to judge them and to bring about justice. It's in revisiting this trial that James tells the people to be patient until the coming of the Lord, implying that breakthrough and deliverance might not come until the Lord's return. This is what we dealt with primarily last week. It's the Lord's way of confronting a faulty paradigm in His people. Good things don't always happen to good and faithful Christians. Sometimes faithfulness keeps you in the trial. Sometimes righteousness invites the trial. And sometimes the trial lasts a lifetime.

The threefold instruction remains: be patient until the coming of the Lord, do not speak against one another, and consider the prophets and Job. In other words, consider how their lives turned out, and yet we regard them as faithful. This ultimately drives at the idea that we do not live for this age, but for the next. We are pilgrims on the earth today. Our home and our valuables, our hope and our reward, are in the next life, not this one. That leads us right into the last verses of his letter. Open your Bibles to James 5:12.

i.

Let Your Yes Be Yes

> 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.
>
> James 5:12, ESV

In the ancient world, there were concepts of binding and non-binding oaths. A binding oath invoked God, and a non-binding oath invoked anything else. It was a way you could promise to do something but get out of it if you wanted to. So people would swear on the earth, or in today's world, "I swear on my mother's grave." It's empty rhetoric that tells you nothing about how sure the promise actually is.

So James strips all the confusion away. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. There should be no second-guessing. If a Christian says yes, you should be able to trust them. If you say yes, it should be binding. That's the point. And when you say no, you should mean it.

Now here is the thing: this requires something from us. It requires that we are slow to give a yes or a no. If you want your yes to be more potent, reliable, and meaningful, then you probably need to say yes less and no more. That means before you commit, count the cost. Really think about it. Before you say yes to something, be honest with yourself. Is this something you can do, want to do, must do, or will do? What often happens is that we cave to perceived social pressure and say yes to things we wouldn't normally say yes to.

The other thing this verse tells us is that it's OK to say no. Which by default means it's OK to hear no. Some of us, myself included, need to be better about saying no. Don't feel bad about it. If you are unsure about your yes, your answer should be no. That means you shouldn't feel uncomfortable saying the word, and you shouldn't think it's rude when someone says it to you.

If you are unsure about your yes, your answer should be no.

This is important because it really is a matter of integrity. We should be trustworthy and honest people, and that begins with this principle.

ii.

Draw Near in Every Season

> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.
>
> James 5:13, ESV

Let's start from the top. Are you suffering? Pray. This is simple. The proper response to your suffering, whatever it is, is to pray. When things get hard, you press on in prayer. Your hardship should drive you toward God. Pray that God would end the suffering. Pray that He would have His way in it. Pray that you would be strengthened to go through it. But let's be honest: the tendency is to complain when things get hard, to process and dwell on the hard. James says that we are simply to pray.

Next line. Are you cheerful? In other words, are you happy? Are things going well? Sing praise. Rejoice, but rejoice to Him. The idea is that no matter what season you are in, your response is to draw near to Him.

iii.

Is Anyone Among You Sick?

> 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. 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. 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. 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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.
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> James 5:14–18, ESV

This passage is challenging, and I'll tell you why. There are two different ways of interpreting this text, and both have their merits. Both seem like a real possibility. I lean toward one interpretation, but I think the other is compelling enough that I can't preach mine alone with a good conscience.

Let's start with the interpretation many of us are familiar with: that this passage is about physical healing. In this reading, if someone is physically sick, they are to call for the elders. The elders put oil on them and pray for their healing. The prayer of faith (that is, the faith of either the elders or the sick person) engages something in

the heavenly realm that brings about their healing. And somewhere in the middle of this exchange, the person confesses their sins and is healed.

This argument seems fair, and it's fair because it really fits the immediate context. Is anyone among you suffering, cheerful, or sick? A natural reading of the text seems to indicate that this is a simple instruction for those who are sick. This is what most charismatics believe, and what most of us grew up believing and practicing. In my observation, though, we don't usually follow this passage to a T. We usually leave out the part about confessing your sins so that you will get physical healing. I think it's worth noting that the earliest church fathers, those writing before the Edict of Milan, say very little about this passage. But overall, many believers have taken this interpretation across the span of Christianity.

Still, this reading leaves us with questions. Why does James connect sickness with forgiveness? Is it because physical sickness indicates personal sin? Why does he mention confession? Is it because unconfessed sin prevents physical healing? What does he mean by the "prayer of faith"? Does that mean if someone isn't healed, they or the elders lacked sufficient faith? Why does he say the Lord "will raise him up"? Is he promising physical healing to every believer who prays in faith?

And what happens if the sick person isn't healed, or eventually dies? Does that mean God failed to keep His promise, or that the person failed to meet the conditions? What is the role of the elders and the anointing with oil? Is there something uniquely powerful about certain ministers, or about the act of anointing itself? Why does James use the language of salvation and forgiveness in a passage about sickness? Is he suggesting that physical healing and spiritual salvation are necessarily connected?

We know that not everyone who prays with faith gets healed. Paul left Trophimus sick (2 Timothy 4:20). Paul told Timothy to drink wine for his stomach issue (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul prayed three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed, for sickness to be healed, and it wasn't (2 Corinthians 12:7–9). Paul was accepted by the Galatian church despite being sick (Galatians 4:13–14). To me, these feel like contradictions within the text. So let's look at the other interpretation: that this passage is about spiritual healing and the restoration of the wandering Christian.

Let me explain why some take this position. The Greek word translated "sick" in verse 14 is *astheneō* (ἀσθενέω). It can mean physically sick or diseased. It can mean weak or without strength. It can mean spiritually or morally weak. There are lots of examples of this word being translated "weak" in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 8, Romans 14). It doesn't demand to be read as physical sickness.

The word translated "sick" in verse 15 is different. There James uses *kamnō* (κάμνω), which can mean to grow weary, to become exhausted, or to be sick. Here is an example: "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Hebrews 12:3). Hebrews is clearly speaking about spiritual exhaustion and discouragement.

"Save" is a major argument for the spiritual restoration interpretation. "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick." The Greek word is *sōzō* (σῴζω). It frequently means spiritual salvation. It can mean healed, yet every other time James uses it in his letter, it's a reference to salvation (James 1:21, 2:14, 4:12, 5:20). And the very next occurrence, only five verses later, explicitly describes saving someone's soul.

This reading also answers the forgiveness of sins. If James is speaking of someone the church today commonly calls a "backslider," or in New Testament language a wanderer, then all of a sudden the forgiveness of sins and the spiritual restoration that were previously unaccounted for are accounted for. It also answers how James can guarantee the outcome. We know that confession and faith bring about salvation. But I think the next verses are what sell it for me. The very next thing James writes about is someone who wanders from the truth and is brought back, and he says that whoever brings him back will save his soul from death (5:19–20).

The big idea is that there are two viable interpretations. It may read very clearly in the English translation, but if you were a first-century Christian reading Greek, it wouldn't be as clear.

iv.

What Is Clear Either Way

What can we glean from the passage regardless of interpretation? First, James refers to elders in the plural. That means there were clear, identifiable elders among their churches. Second, the sick person initiates the request. James says to call for the elders. We have to make our needs known. Leaders, and people more broadly, can't always anticipate your needs. Third, elders have pastoral responsibility for the flock. Their work includes caring for suffering members. Fourth, God meets the sick person. Whether spiritual or physical restoration is needed, we pray, we confess, and we trust God.

Fifth, we pray as individuals, we pray with our elders, and we pray for one another. In verse 13, the individual prays. In verse 14, the elders pray. In verse 16, the congregation prays. James moves from personal prayer to pastoral prayer to mutual prayer. His point is this: if we are going to stay the course, it requires prayer across all fronts.

Prayer Across All Fronts

The individual prays › The elders pray › The congregation prays

v.

Bring Them Back

> My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.
>
> James 5:19–20, ESV

And with this line, James ends his letter. No formal goodbye. No closing pleasantries. He simply ends with this warning about wandering from the truth, and the responsibility we have to bring one another back. This is his closing for a very specific reason. Do you know what it is? This verse is the whole purpose of the letter. James is trying to call them back from their wandering. And his instruction to them is that they would follow in his footsteps, restoring one another when they get off the path, so that their souls would be saved from death.

I think that's a fitting way for us to end this series. For five chapters and thirteen weeks, we've walked through a letter that has challenged us in just about every area of our lives. And through all of it, James has been driving at one main theme: double-mindedness. Believing in God, but living as if you don't. To live in double-mindedness is to wander from God.

Before You Close the Book

I want to end by reminding you of what James says in chapter one. The word of God is like a mirror, and he warns you not to look into that mirror, see what is true, and then go on with your life without doing anything about it. So I have two admonitions for you as we close the book. First, that you wouldn't feel the conviction of the last thirteen weeks and do nothing about it. Second, that you would be good Christian brothers and sisters, and make sure we don't allow one another to wander.

To live in double-mindedness is to wander from God.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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