10-6-24

James 5:13-20 (2)

As we saw last Sunday, there are four uses of the tongue that James explains to us that are good. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, those of us who are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ can use what is set on fire by hell to help others and glorify God. Our God is all-powerful and able to use even the likes of us to build the Kingdom of Jesus.

But each of these good uses of our tongues comes with responsibilities; our correct response to what is going on. We covered the first three of these. The first is directed to those who might be suffering and these are to pray. This can be any form of suffering: medical, emotional, financial, depression; whatever threatens to steal our joy in the Lord. We pray for strength and guidance; we ask for relief from the suffering and we ask to have any sin in our lives revealed so that we can repent.

Secondly, James tells those who are cheerful to sing praises. To be joyful is a good thing and all good things come from God. It is good and proper to thank Him; and part of thanking Him is to praise Him. Because He is the one true God, He is worthy of praise; He is worthy of worship just for who He is. How much more we should praise Him when He sees fit to give us a spirit of cheerfulness.

Next we are given instructions on what to do when we are sick. The first responsibility is given to the sick person; he is to call for the elders of the church. This is an act of faith expressed by the sick person. The next responsibility is for the elders; they are to come pray for the sick person and anoint them with oil. James also talks about the rest of the church praying for each other so all can be involved.

James also mentions confessing sin. If we have a difficult sin or a besetting sin, confessing to a trusted brother or sister in Christ can help to deal with it. Doing so forces us into accountability and allows the other to pray for our specific need.

In this command to pray for the sick, we have to admit that there are times where it seems that the person is not healed and we have to wonder why such a direct promise appears to go unfulfilled. First we temper things with knowing that God’s will must be done and His will is perfect and just and will lead to the fulfillment of His plan for the human race. Secondly, we consider Proverb 3:5, “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding.*” Therefore, we do what God’s word says to do and trust Him for the outcome.

This leaves us with the fourth action we are to carry out with our speech and the responsibility here lies with the church. James ends his letter somewhat abruptly but with strong words that carry a heavy weight and are of great importance. *My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 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.*

We might be tempted to think that he is speaking of those who are outside the church; and while sharing the Gospel with the lost is what we are to do and can save their soul from death, James is speaking about those who are in the church; professing Christians. He begins with “*My brethren*” so he is still speaking to the church. And then he says, “*if any of you strays from the truth*”. James is referring to professing Christians who are living a life that is contrary to Christian doctrine or Christian morality. And there is really a lot in here for us to consider.

First, lets think about what kind of death James is talking about here. Is he talking about physical death or spiritual death; in other words, wondering away from salvation and suffering damnation? Your translation may say something like: “*save him from death*” or it may say “*save his soul from death*”. Regardless, James is talking about avoiding spiritual death; so “*save his soul from death*” is the closer translation.

And this is important because the Lord can bring about the physical death of a Christian if there is a problem. For example, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11 about proper preparation for the Lord’s Supper, part of which is that we examine ourselves so that we do not partake in an unworthy manner. Then in verses 29 and 30 he says: *For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.*

Here we see why it’s so important to take the Lord’s Supper with reverence and having great respect for Jesus. These were Christians who did not take the Lord’s Supper seriously and suffered sickness and even death. Now, I believe that the Lord brought about these consequences in mercy. The sickness would have been a wake-up call. When sick, we need to assess ourselves to see if there is any unconfessed sin that needs to be dealt with. Death would have stopped the Christian from falling further into sin if God knew that’s where they were heading.

Perhaps now would be the time to consider two different words: backsliding and apostacy. Backsliding is when a Christian takes less interest in the things of the Lord. Perhaps he gets out of the habit of going to church or spending time in the Bible. He thinks less about Christ and more about things of the world. A backslider is more likely to drift into sin but still hold to a basic Christian morality. Probably all of us are guilty of backsliding at one time or another.

Backsliding doesn’t cost us our salvation; but it costs us our close relationship with Jesus. It gets in the way of our prayers. We may get less guidance from the Holy Spirit so we wonder into trouble and, hopefully, being in trouble will cause us to turn to seek the Lord again. We will not bear fruit for Christ’s Kingdom nor will we store up treasure in heaven. In extreme cases, it may lead to the Lord calling us home so we don’t go too far.

Apostacy is a different story. This is someone who has claimed Christ but then turns, not only from Him, but against Him. Apostacy can only be committed by someone who has a very good understanding of Christianity and has probably experienced the joy it brings. But they turn away and refuse Christ. Apostacy leads to eternal spiritual death. Apostacy should terrify us.

Now, the question that always comes up is, “Can a Christian commit apostacy”? That is a question that faithful Christians have debated for a couple thousand years. I personally don’t believe that someone who is saved can lose their salvation. John 10:27-30 are very powerful verses where Jesus says: *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”*

No one, including ourselves, is able to take us from Jesus; we are His sheep forever. But the question each of us must make sure of is, “Am I one of His sheep?” “Am I truly saved?” “Have I actually accepted Jesus as my Lord and Saviour?” We each need to look at the evidence. We look at whether our lives are bearing fruit for Jesus; we look at our actions; we consider whether or not we live in way that is morally pleasing to God; we ought to have had a change take place in our hearts for the good. As John says in his first letter, “*we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.*” (1 John 5:3)

A person can appear to be a Christian and even think so themselves. And it can be impossible for us to tell they are not. The apostle Paul mentions a man named Demas in two of his letters as being a fellow worker in Christ. But then in his first letter to Timothy he writes, “*Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica*”. So even Paul couldn’t tell that Demas wasn’t sincere.

Hebrews 6 tells us about the consequences of apostacy: *For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.* Apostacy brings spiritual death. This is the type of death James is speaking of when he talks about saving someone’s soul. Again, apostacy should terrify us.

From 1 John 2:19 comes the understanding that someone who becomes apostate had not truly accepted Christ in the first place. He says: *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, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.* So, an apostate will leave the church. To complicate things, there are also those who will never become apostate but they’re not saved either.

Going back to James; he is wanting the true believers to be on the lookout for those who may be heading for apostacy and do our best to turn them back. I think Jesus’ parable of the four soils speaks to this.

The first soil is hard and the seed is snatched up by the birds. This is a hard heart where satan steals away the Gospel before it can sink in. The second soil is shallow; the seed springs up quickly but also die quickly because of the heat of the sun; it has no root. There are people who think Christianity is a good idea and seem to spring up quickly but their belief is shallow. As soon as there is adversity, they fall away. The third soil is full of weeds. The seed sprouts but the weeds come up too and choke it out. A person can accept Jesus but the worries of the world and chasing after money choke out the Gospel. The fourth soil is good and produces much fruit. So is the heart that truly hears and receives the Gospel. Jesus becomes their Lord and Saviour.

The church visible has all four types of people in it. The church visible is what you see when you look at all the congregations. It is all the people who are sitting there. The church invisible is the true church; it consists of the people who are truly followers of Jesus Christ. So unfortunately, just because someone is in church doesn’t mean they are a Christian.

James is asking us to look for the first three types of soil before they turn against Christ entirely. We need to help them to be truly established in Christ before it is too late. They are not saved and they are vulnerable. In a word, they need discipleship.

The person with the hard heart hasn’t even thought the Gospel was a good idea. They may be attending church just for the social time or to make business acquaintances. Probably about the only thing we can do for these folks is love them and pray for them because God is the only One who can soften a heart of stone.

The other two need to be transplanted by means of discipleship. The one in shallow soil needs support and encouragement. They need to know that following Jesus doesn’t mean that everything will go smoothly, but that He will give the strength needed to persevere.

The one choked by weeds; the one who is overcome by problems needs to have physical help and encouragement. They need lifted up so they can see past their problems to the solution of Jesus. They need to know that the treasure they store up in heaven will be of infinitely greater value than the treasure of earth. All of these must hear the word; all of these need to feel the love of the true church.

Which brings us back to the church’s responsibility. Each and every one who is a member of the invisible church has the call to watch out for their brothers and sisters in Christ; and to try to bring back one who strays before it is too late. Leadership has responsibility too; but a main part of their responsibility is to equip the saints for their work. You are the saints.can

None of this calls for someone to be the “thought police” or to call out every misstep; remember, we each can have a log in our own eye. But the call is to reach out tenderly and lovingly to those who may be stumbling, with the idea of helping but not in a condescending way. It can be a matter of eternal life and eternal death. Along these lines, Jude also has good advice for us. *And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.* (Jude 1:22-23)

Prayer

Lord, we understand that there will be some, who taste Your goodness, who understand the precious Gospel of Jesus, who are even given the gift of faith, but who will turn away and reject the One, the only One, who can give them eternal life. It seems impossible to us that one who has experienced You would then turn away; but that is the depravity of the human heart.

May these words of James ring in our ears. Open our eyes so that we may see if one who is not truly committed is beginning to take the path that leads to apostacy. Give us discernment that we might notice that they have deviated; either in doctrine or in morality. Then give us wisdom that we might share that real hope of Jesus with them in such a way that they turn to Him in truth.

Guide us that we may always keep an eye on ourselves. Constantly remind us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. All the while praising You for the salvation You have already given us in Jesus. We await the consummation of salvation once we have persevered to the end and stand in Your presence.

We praise You in Jesus’ name

Amen