9-29-24

James 5:13-20 (1)

James has written a very practical letter to the Jewish Christians who are scattered throughout much of the known world. His words apply to us today. The Christian life is based on the belief that we are sinners who cannot stand before a Holy God; and deserve eternal punishment for our rebellion. We believe that God has made a way for us to be redeemed; a way for our sins and guilt to be removed and for us to be covered in righteousness. That way is Jesus. We accept Him as our Lord and Saviour in true faith.

We no longer try to work for our salvation; we can’t earn it anyway. But as James has made very clear, our works should be abundant and our way of life ought to reflect the life of Christ. These are then the evidence of our truly accepting the gift of Jesus as our Saviour. When He becomes our Saviour, He ought also to become our Lord. If He is our Lord then we live our life in accordance with His desires. And that is why the practical instruction of James is so important.

In his closing statements of this letter, James discusses four different groups of people who are in the church: those who are suffering, those who are cheerful, those who are sick, and those who are backsliding. We will look into the first three today and if the Lord allows, we will cover backsliding next Sunday.

James first mentions suffering. Suffering is a fact of life. And all suffering has one root source: sin. Now that doesn’t mean that as soon as someone sins they suffer for it; nor does it mean that if you are suffering it is because you have committed some sin and are being punished. The book of Job makes it very clear that someone can suffer terribly even though they are a righteous person. Sin is a terrible force; it is a terrible evil that is at work in this world and the consequence of this evil force is suffering.

Furthermore, Jesus was very upfront that if you are a follower of His, you will suffer for just that reason. For one thing, those who are children of satan will persecute you. For another, satan himself will persecute you through his demonic legions. You may have someone persecute you or simply cause you problems who doesn’t even know that you are a Christian; but the demons who influence them do.

Suffering, of course, takes many forms. Sickness is one form that James discusses in more detail. But there is also injury and the ravages of life on our bodies. How about just having a hard time dealing with someone; possibly in the church, but more likely out in the world. We may fall into legal trouble either through a mistake or even through no fault of our own. The same can happen with financial difficulties. Perhaps we deal with depression or just feel that circumstances are too much for us. There is no lack of suffering and I know that everyone here has dealt with plenty.

Of course, this leads to one of the great questions that all of us want to know the answer to: Why does a good all-powerful God allow the tremendous amount of suffering that takes place in this world? Why does He allow children to go through all the horrible things children can be put through? Why does He allow natural disasters, wars, and famines?

Let me begin by telling you that when it comes to an exact and definitive answer, I don’t know. And neither does anyone else. Although many people have written entire books on the subject, the Bible itself only gives us a little insight. One sermon can’t begin to cover all the nuances of suffering, but let me just touch on a few of the answers.

To begin with, God gave us free-will. He told Adam not to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. While Adam had his instruction, God didn’t put some kind of physical restraint on him; Adam had to choose whether to obey or not. He chose not to obey and sin and death and suffering entered the world. Although we still have free-will, it is now tainted and we are strongly pulled in the direction of sin. As sin increases so do its effects.

God will use suffering as a means of trying to bring people to Him or to punish those who rebel against Him. Even in punishment, the idea is to get them to turn to Him for mercy. In 2 Peter 3:9 we are told that the Lord does not wish for any to perish. He desires for all to come to Him, but the choice is ours.

God will use suffering to discipline His people. From Hebrews 12:4, *“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives.”* This is important for us if we are suffering. We need to make sure that there is not sin dwelling in our lives or if there is some unconfessed sin. If there is, we need to repent. Now it may be that we don’t find any particular sin that needs dealt with; in that case the suffering has another purpose.

It could be just to strengthen us. Perhaps our suffering will help someone else in the future. Or, as in the case of Job, our suffering may be to glorify God. If that seems unfair, just remember the suffering Christ went through just to offer us salvation. Suffering can seem all encompassing to us since we live this physical life of probably less than a hundred years. We don’t want to spend our short time in pain. But remember to focus on eternity where we will spend thousands and billions and trillions of years in absolute joy and peace.

We also have a promise for this life, the famous verse in Romans 8:28, *“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”* As we go through suffering, it is a lousy experience; but we know that as Christians, we love God and have a purpose that He has called us to. Our pain will work out for good.

It all comes down to one principle: trust God. That’s what He wants us to do. We know that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. We are called to follow Jesus by faith. Over and again in the Bible we see that God simply wants us to trust Him. When we do so, we have the promise of eternal joy once our few years on this earth are over.

So, what is James’ answer to suffering? Pray. Now, if there is something we can do in the physical to lessen the suffering, we can do that. But, we are to pray. We can certainly ask God to remove the suffering, but we remain ready to accept His answer. We ask God to reveal any sin hidden in our hearts so that we can repent. We pray for wisdom to guide us through our difficulties without becoming jaded and turning against our Lord. We ask for strength to endure. We ask that our suffering bring God glory. And we praise Him for His greatness in the midst of our pain.

None of this is to downplay suffering or bad things in our lives. The effects of sin are miserable. Suffering is a painful process and it can drag on with no end in sight. When in this condition, asking God for help is the best thing we can do. Additionally, the church has a part to play. We ought to be comforting our brothers and sisters in Christ who are going through difficulty; meeting their physical needs; offering help; and most of all, praying for them.

James moves on to ask if anyone is cheerful. If so, they are to sing praises. Does it really mean “sing”? Well, that’s what it says. One of the big problems for when things are going well is that we tend to forget about God. If we are suffering, we are quick to turn to Him. But how often do we simply go our merry way when life is good. The Bible tells us that all good things come from God. Because of that, we ought to always be praising Him for the good things we do have. And we can have joy and cheerfulness even during suffering. That is the peace from Christ that passes all understanding.

Some folks seem to be born to sing and for them it’s easy to sing praises to the Lord. For others, it can be more difficult. May I suggest the Psalms. Any of us can find the Psalms of praise and softly sing them to God when no one else is around. He is worthy of the effort and of the praise. It is good to sing His own words back to Him.

I believe the main thing is to praise Him; worship our God because He is worthy. He is unique; there is no other like Him. He is perfect and holy and He loves to bestow blessings on His people. He deserves our gratitude.

I think a point to be made here is to notice that after all the warnings about the evil of the tongue and how careful we must be with it, James now gives us some proper uses of the tongue. When we belong to Christ, our tongue can be controlled and put to good use. In these last four topics of James’ letter they are to pray, to praise, to call for the elders for prayer, and to bring back those who are straying from Christ.

We come to the third topic and that is dealing with sickness. To say the least, these passages are difficult to deal with. The reason being that although we many times pray for the sick, often they don’t get well. There have been several attempts to explain this. One explanation is that this is referring to spiritual healing. Although that may be part of what James is talking about, his wording means physical healing. Another attempt is to say that we will be healed in eternity if we are followers of Christ. While that is true, again, James’ language is about physical healing during this life.

One other common explanation focuses on the phrase “*the prayer offered in faith*”. If someone isn’t healed, then it is said that they didn’t have enough faith. This is an incorrect interpretation. This claim only adds to the sick person’s problems. Now, in addition to being sick, they believe their faith is weak so guilt is piled on.

No, there is something else going on, and we don’t know exactly what it is. But we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus was the only perfect healer. Even the apostle Paul left his friend Trophimus ill at Miletus, and his fellow worker Epaphroditus was near death in his sickness. Timothy had an ongoing stomach condition such that Paul advised him to drink a little wine instead of just water.

So, what do we do with these verses? Follow them. They are verses in the Bible that we claim to believe are the word of God. Before I continue, let me say that these verses do not negate going to a doctor to seek medical treatment. God is the One who has given doctors their skills and knowledge and has brought about all the medical advancements we have. Doctors are one of the means God will use to heal us. Just be sure you give God the glory and credit for any healing that comes through their means.

The first thing James says here is that if you are sick, you are to call for the elders of the church. This is an act of faith made by the sick person. There is no reason for this church body to neglect this. While I don’t think this applies to every sneeze or sniffle, I know there are times where we are sick or injured and James’ directions here would apply.

I realize that this church currently only has one elder. But further in these verses, James mentions us praying for each other. We can certainly take part in the anointing of the sick with our deacons; and even with the whole church congregation if the person is able to come to church. Elders and church leadership do have specific qualifications but they are not really any more than any follower of Christ should be practicing. I think they are singled out because they do have extra responsibility and authority as under shepherds of the flock.

The oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. It is through Him that Jesus healed during His ministry on earth. It is through Him that the apostles were able to perform healing miracles. And it is through Him that any healing will take place in the church body through prayer.

The forgiveness of sins is important. Sin in our lives can affect how God will work in our lives. We are able to pray for the forgiveness of each other’s sins; we can intercede for them. James advocates confessing our sins to each other. This is not so much a command as it is a means of grace; a way for us to be blessed with God’s grace more abundantly.

I don’t take this to mean that we stand in front of the church body and air all our dirty laundry; we’d never get out of here. I really think this is for a major failing in our Christian walk, or for dealing with a besetting sin; a sin that keeps coming back in our minds or life and we can’t seem to conquer. Also, I think it wise to have one mature brother or sister in Christ to confess to. And the whole purpose is for personal accountability and so that the other person can pray for you.

Prayer is powerful and necessary in the Christian life. James uses the example of Elijah. We hold him in high regard as a great prophet and man of God. Yet as James points out, he had a nature like us: he got scared, he got tired, he became disheartened; he needed God to strengthen him. And God heard his prayers and responded powerfully. He will respond to us also. *The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.* An effective prayer is one that believes that God will answer not simply that He can. An effective prayer believes that God hears and will act. It also accepts the answer that God gives.

We are all called to be holy and we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus. We all have the qualifications to have our prayers answered mightily by God. Let’s use that gift to the glory of God and the benefit of the church.

Prayer

O Lord, how amazing it is that You have given us the gift of prayer. There are countless people in high positions in this world that we will never be able to talk to; yet You, the Creator God of the universe, have made Yourself available to us each and every moment of the day. Not only that, but You are pleased to hear from us.

Lord, it seems easy to come to You when we are in trouble. You are the natural one to turn to. Help us to pray in these times in the proper way; not in grumbling or complaining, but in truly seeking an answer from You. Then may we praise You in that answer no matter what it is. Help us to trust in Your wisdom for our lives.

Thank You Lord that we do have joyous times in this life that we may thank You for. These are small glimpses of what eternity holds in store for us in Jesus. So, we praise You merciful God, knowing that You have our best interest in mind and that You are the One who has bestowed any blessing we have had.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen