

SESSION TEN

Living for Others (*James 5:13-20*)

“What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use -- men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men, men of prayer.” ~ E. M. Bounds

I. Overview

James concludes his epistle with the topic of prayer and accountability. He will begin by addressing the importance of prayer, its power, and implications for the believer and the Church. He then concludes this epistle with the importance of accountability. In stressing these two areas, he reiterates a major theme in his epistle—the importance of cultivating a true, active, obedient, and genuine faith.

II. The Content

A. Praying and Healing (5:13-18)

v. 13 - James' exhortation to pray resembles the conclusion of several New Testament letters (e.g., Rom 15:30-32; Eph 6:18-20; Phil 4:6; 2 Thess 3:1-2; Heb 13:18-19).

“trouble” - The term connotes experiencing difficulty (cf. 2 Tim 2:9; 4:5). A call to pray during a time of suffering is certainly not foreign to the book of James (cf. 1:2-4, 12; 5:7-11).

“sing songs of praise” - Through the Old and New Testament, followers of God are called to private and public praise (cf. 1 Cor 14:15; Eph 5:19). Similar to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:15-20, the singing of praises to God displays a wise man who recognizes God's grace in his life.

v. 14 - Most scholars argue that the individual suffers from physical illness. However, it would seem best to argue that the individual suffers primarily from emotional distress and possibly a physical ailment. The basis for this interpretation is the following:

- The term “sick” literally means “to be weak” (cf. 1 Cor 8:9-12).
- The context of James centers upon emotional suffering and overall encounters with the difficulties of life.
- Elsewhere, the New Testament addresses healing of the soul (e.g., Heb 12:13; 1 Pet 2:24).
- The pouring of oil is used for medicinal purposes in the NT era (cf. Lk 10:34).
- If physical ailment, then everyone who prays in faith should be healed (*contra* 2 Cor 12:7-9).

“calling on the elders” - The believer is unable physically to meet the church leaders, they must come to him.

“anointing with oil” - This practice is mentioned in only one other location in the New Testament (i.e., Mark 6:13). Major interpretations of this action include:

1. Medicinal purpose - Oil was often used as a form of medicine (cf. Lk 10:34).
2. Pastoral purpose - This would be an outward expression of concern and stimulation of faith on the part of the physically ill.
3. Sacramental purpose - This was an action granting grace and divine power.
4. Symbolic purpose - This act consecrates an individual for God’s use and service.

v. 15 - The prayer of faith is a prayer that expresses trust in God and is rooted in a commitment to the Lord (cf. Jas 1:5-8). As aptly noted by McCartney in his commentary on James, “Faith energizes prayer, but not because faith is some kind of magical power or psychic force that effectualizes the prayer. Faith is that which connects a person to God and characterizes a relationship with God. It is this relationship to the healing God that secures answers to prayer.” (p. 255).

Note that it is the prayer offered in faith, not the anointing of oil or the presence of elders, that brings healing. Also, observe that sin may or may not be present in this person’s life.

“The statement is simple and straightforward: two promises, one for the body (the obvious, pressing need), the other for the soul. The person will be healed totally.” (Davids, James, 195).

v. 16 - The confession of one’s sin is vital to the spiritual vitality of the individual as well as to the community. In his commentary on James, Douglas Moo cautions that this confession of sin is in the context of sins that may have caused the illness (p. 246).

“effectiveness” - James is referring to God’s response to the prayer, not the prayer itself.

McCartney is correct in pointing out that “the only forgiveness in view here is God’s forgiveness . . . the mutual confession is for the purpose of intercession with God, not reconciliation between fellow believers” (James, 257).

vv. 17-18 - “human being like us” - Most commentators argue this phrase simply indicates that Elijah was no super saint. However, one wonders if the phrase does not recall Elijah’s own shortcomings. He, too, struggled emotionally under the pressures of life (cf. 1 Kgs 19:3-8).

“prayed earnestly” - While the Old Testament makes little reference to Elijah’s prayer life, later Jewish writings do. In fact, the most commonly referenced historical event from the life of Elijah found among the Jewish writers is his prayer life!

The reference to “rain” may recall God’s gracious provisions to the patient farmer in 5:7.

B. Closing Encouragement (5:19-20)

vv. 19-20 - “wanders” - This term denotes a rejection of the will of God and unwillingness to submit to His leading. The term is often used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to idolatry (cf. Isa 9:15; Jer 23:17).

“turn him back” - James refers to “turning” twice in the text. The term is rare in the latter part of the New Testament. This unusual appearance of the term may be due to James’ reference to Elijah in the previous verses. The phrase “to bring back” is used by the prophet Malachi to describe the role of the “eschatological” Elijah. Even Jesus refers to Elijah’s future role of restoring hearts in Matthew 17. The prophet Elijah was well-known for his prayer life. He was also acknowledged for his influence in turning the hearts of the Israelites back to the Lord.

“to cover sin” - The phrase normally conveys the notion of the forgiveness of sin (cf. Rom 4:7).

“multitude of sin” - The expression speaks to the extent of the forgiveness (cf. Prov 10:12).

“Not only should the readers of James ‘do’ the words he has written; they should be deeply concerned to see that others ‘do’ them” (Moo, James, 251).

III. Intersect

- A. Sin is never compartmentalized. Sin will invade all areas of a person’s life and the life of his/her community.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8 -

- B. We must remember that sin may or may not be associated with physical illness or emotional struggles.

John 9:1-3 -

- C. We need to be actively involved in the lives of believers around us. We are accountable to the Body of Christ.

Galatians 6:1-2 -

“Beware in your prayers, above everything else, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what He can do. Expect unexpressed things, ‘above all that we ask or think’. Each time before you intercede, be quiet first, and worship God in His glory. Think of what He can do, and how He delights to hear the prayers of His redeemed people. Think of your place and privilege in Christ, and expect great things!”
~ Andrew Murray