

The Final Call To Action

James 5:12-20

Last Sermons highlights:

Introduction:

James concludes his letter in the final verses with some very specific pastoral concerns for the church...I have to say, I'm sad to be leaving James. I wish he had about 20 instead of 5 chapters. Let's walk through this last passage together.

James 5:12 ¹² 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.

- I. "Above all" doesn't mean that what follows is more important than what he has said thus far.
 - A. It is likely a literary phrase marking that he is coming in for a landing.
 1. At the same time, it's not just a literary device...he could have chosen other phrases.
 2. So he is indicating the coming finish line but he is also showing that this command gets at the heart of the things he has been focused on.
 - B. "Above all do not swear" gets at James' concern for personal integrity and relational unity.
 1. Matching words to heart...heart to words. And changed hearts bring changed relationships.
 2. We have seen this over and over in his letter, words flow from the heart, words implicate the heart...words impact others.
 - C. When he says "do not swear" he is not merely saying "Don't use profanity"...that is covered elsewhere in Scripture.
 - D. This also doesn't mean we should never take an oath on any kind.
 1. For instance, a marriage vow, or oath of office or in a courtroom.
 2. Paul frequently appears to take an oath to reinforce the truth of what he says, 7 times he says something like...

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a. **2 Cor 1:23- “I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.”**

3. Earlier, James said we should not presume on God when planning the future but he wasn't saying we must always include a verbal formula, “God willing” whenever we discuss our future plans.
 4. He was addressing the heart...don't live, think, plan as if you control outcomes.
 - a. You could add, “God willing” to a phrase, and your heart could be far from actually trusting God with the future.
 5. Here he's not saying that if we simply avoid ever taking an oath then we are good to go...He is always going for the heart.
- E. Verbal oaths is not the main issue...the heart is...words matter, but words originate in the heart.
1. **Proverbs 4:23 Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.**
- F. Look at the similarity between what Jesus said in Matt 5:33-37 and what James writes here: here are the passages side by side.

<u>James</u>	<u>Jesus</u>
Do not swear an oath at all	Do not swear
either by heaven...	not by heaven
or by the earth...	or by earth
or by Jerusalem...	or by anything else

1. This passage in Matthew comes from Jesus' famous sermon on the mount...where he outlines life in the Kingdom of God...it's different than what many thought it would be.
 - a. Over and over, he says in that sermon, “You have heard it said, but I say..”
 - b. And in those instances, he goes from mere externals to internals...he goes for the heart.
- G. James is saying the same thing as Jesus here: **our truthfulness should be such a reliable constant that we need no oath to support it.**

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1. From our transformed hearts...should flow transformed lives...words and actions.
 2. If you need to say, "I swear to God, I'm telling the truth," then every time you don't swear, can we assume you are lying?
- H. Can you see how bad the relationship has become if you have to add qualifiers like this?
1. Condemnation here is not because of adding extra words, "I swear, I'm telling the truth." And the solution is not that you must always answer with "Yes" or "no" like a robot.
 - a. The judgment is aimed at the heart and in the context of community unity that James is so passionate about.
 2. The lower the trust between us, the more perfect the communication has to be. The higher the trust, the more room there is for mistakes in our words.

This is really important...

- I. Because James has already said that we are never going to be perfect if our words...so if relationships depend on perfection in communication, we are never going to have good relationships.
 1. I think what was happening is that since trust was low between the people in the church...because they were not living their lives consistently with the gospel...they were resorting to using oaths to try and convince each other of the truth of what they were saying.
 2. This is a losing proposition...if trust is low and I don't believe you...how would adding "I swear to God" change things?
 - a. It would just make me think you are more unreliable.
- J. But if they were to love, forgive, put each other's interests first...then they could build the kind of trust that would allow for straight forward communication.
 1. But when trust is low...no matter what is said, it is taken wrong...and then trust goes lower...and communication becomes harder.
- K. In the church we are to break this death spiral by the grace of God and our own personal commitment to grit...making good hard, choices...forgive, give room to fail.
- L. Live what we believe is true.

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1. Our sanctification (becoming like Christ), is a collaboration between God's grace and our choices (grit) and it is a life-long process and it is most readily revealed in our relationships with each other.
2. This is key to understanding James...hearts changed by our relationship with God, showing up in our choices, impacting our relationships with each other...bringing glory to God.

Let's get past swearing and move on.

James 5:13-15: Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

-Prayer: James packed a lot in that paragraph. Of course, ***prayer is the topic***, it's mentioned in every verse. In context, remember that this community was experiencing trials...trials that threatened to separate them from trust in Christ and trust in one another.

This is similar to Paul wrote I Thessalonians 5:17-18 , "¹⁷Pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances". James breaks down all circumstances into two main situations: having trouble, feeling happy

A. "If you are in trouble/experiencing difficulty,"...pray

1. We might assume that James is encouraging us to pray for God to remove the trouble, and that is not an unreasonable assumption...but it may not be the full story.
2. We have already seen that James' concern in trials is that we endure with the right heart and an alternative perspective than that of those who do not know God.
 - i. **"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."** James 1:2-4

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- ii. **“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him”** James 1:12

3. So, we can assume the prayer he is encouraging here is for God’s grace and human grit to endure the trial.

4. Not that it is wrong to pray for relief...but that is not his main focus.

B. The other situation James describes as...“If you are happy, sing songs of praise”. The word James uses here denotes a “state of emotions”...(The ESV...translates it as “cheerful”

1. If you are feeling groovy...great...be sure and turn your heart towards God.

2. A reminder to turn towards God is often more necessary when we are feeling good about our lives than we are suffering.

- i. The challenge is to turn to God when you are doing well.

C. James then gives a sub-category of the first general circumstance: “if you are in trouble”

1. The kind of trouble is, specifically, sickness.

- i. This is not a “to do” or “checklist” that must be done exactly like this, with guaranteed results.

- ii. That kind of thinking emerges when we lift verses out of their immediate or larger biblical context.

II. What is James’ trying to communicate here?

A. First, and I think foremost... we should turn to the Lord and to his servants (Church) when we are suffering.

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe.

Yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from physicians. 2 Chron. 16:12

1. Asa was one of Israel’s relatively good kings. (There weren’t many...and he failed to finish well himself)
2. He was faithful to God’s covenant for many years, he even deposed his own mom when she messed around with idolatry. But as he aged and got used to peace, forgetting that it was the peace that God gave the kingdom because he sought God. But when faced with the choice of continuing to trust God...whatever that

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meant...even facing opposition...he took the wrong path. He relied on foreign kings, and his own gold...rather than God to make life happen.

3. When a prophet came to challenge him on this...he put the prophet in jail...and then turned vindictive toward his own people. Then the final indictment on him, shows the real condition of his heart.
 - a. There is nothing wrong with seeking help from the physicians...the point is...“even” in his disease he did not seek the Lord. This was how far he had fallen...he wasn't turning to God in the bad times...he had drifted away from the truth, **the reality of God.**
4. All that God had done, all his former passion...were now phantom memories, the dust of youth...taken by the constant pull of everyday life. He became so hardened...that even in his fatal illness he did not turn to God.
 - a. John Paul Sartre (sar truh) was an influential 20th century philosopher/author.
 - b. He was atheist most of his life...and convinced a lot of people to disbelieve in God along with him. He had a long-term relationship with a fellow atheist philosopher, Simone Beauvoir (Bowv wahr)
 - c. At the end of his life, Sartre turned towards Christianity and Beauvoir was infuriated...she felt betrayed by him.
 - i. How dare he believe in God...just because he was facing death! She remained, as far as we know, resolute in her own denial of God to the end.
 - d. What happened to Sartre is common (illness and impending death, opening the heart to God)...what happened to Beauvoir is also common (hardness unto death)
 - i. It's been said that there are no atheists in foxholes...or on death beds...this is simply not true. People can and do choose to turn to or from God in all of life's circumstances...James is advocating for turning towards God and the community of God...in our times of trouble.

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B. What about this whole... “Ask the elders to pray and anoint with oil.”

1. Elders were the recognized leaders in the local church. They were not spiritually special people, but ideally, were leaders because they had proven to be faithful people. James is assuming this is true...because it ought to be true.
 - a. So, call leaders in the church...people with authentic walks with God.
 - b. There are many opinions about the use of oil here...bottom line we don't know for sure.
 - i. Some think it was medicinal, that's doubtful.
 - ii. Some think it is sacramental, meaning that it was somehow was a kind of conduit for God's healing power...also not likely.
 - iii. Others think, ...it was a physical action symbolizing heart consecration.
-Like baptism -Oil was used often in that society as a sign of setting someone apart.
 - c. Samuel anointed David with oil saying “God has chosen you to be king.”
 - i. -The oil didn't make it happen, it symbolized what God had done.
2. I think it's fine to use oil, and fine to not use it when praying...just like saying “God willing” in future plans...the words are not a formula...the heart is the issue.
3. So here, using oil isn't the point...a heart consecrated to the purposes of God is the point. Clearly this person is sick enough that the church leaders have to come to him or her.
 - i. Three questions come to my mind here.
 1. Is this a guarantee of healing if you do this just right? And
 2. Whose faith failed, if the person is not healed...the sick person's or the ones praying for him? Or no one?
 3. Is sickness always the result of sin? Is that what he is implying.

1. No, it's not a guarantee:

-This an implied conditional promise, you find these throughout scripture.

-The condition is not always stated in every instance, but it there in Scripture as a whole. For example: God told Jonah, “God tell Nineveh, they are doomed, 40 days I will overturn the city.” However, Nineveh, repented, they turned to God and God did not destroy them.

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-Did God lie? No, there is an implied condition..."if they do not repent, I will destroy them."

You see this often in Scripture. What is the implied condition here in James related to healing? ***The larger purposes of God.***

Paul, who prayed for many who were healed, asked God three times to heal him of his own illness and God said, "No, I have other purposes in your illness than healing you." So, this is no formula...that if you do it just right, you obligate God.

2. That answer also speaks to the second question, whose faith failed if the sick person is not healed?

-No one's faith failed.

-Faith trusts God to heal, and faith trusts God when he doesn't.

*The ultimate purpose of life is not to "be physically well" and then die.

-If so, then we are all going to fail at death...death is ultimate physical unwellness.

God has his purposes in illness, healing, health, trouble, feeling groovy...all of it.

Our purpose is his glory.

Story of Jess Capps and her parents Huge FAITH

-James is advocating for faith in God, revealed in faithful actions...those actions include...asking God for healing when we are sick. But in line with the overall theme of his letter...trusting God's purposes in all things.

3. Final question; is sickness always the result of an individual's sin?

-No, not always...sometimes it is, sometimes it's not.

"IF" he has sinned...he will be forgiven James wrote.

In John 9 Jesus and his followers encountered a man who was blind from birth.

They asked "Who sinned that this man was born blind...him or his parents?"

This was prevailing view of their time.

There was no third choice...someone sinned or he would not be suffering, but who's?

"Neither," Jesus said, "his blindness was so that the work of God might be displayed in his life"...then Jesus healed him.

*By the way, as a part of healing the man, Jesus made some mud with dirt and his own spit.

-I think just as the oil was symbolic so too was this mud.

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*I don't know why Jesus made spit mud for this blind man, my guess is, so the man could feel it in his body...he couldn't see what was going on. There's nothing magic about the mud...but something tangible for the man to connect to the memory of his healing.

-There are times when illness (and a host of other life problems) are directly tied to our sin.

*So, we need to continually take advantage of the kindness of God through which he offers us the chance to repent of our sin.

*But it's not so simple that every problem is related to a specific sin.

-So, when we are sick...we should take appropriate medicine, seek the Lord to see if there is sin to confess, ask others to pray for us, perhaps rebuke Satan when appropriate.

-This is a fully biblical and a fully rational approach to life.

-It is irrational to only seek doctors...as if we are only physical bodies...and as if there is no God.

-It is also irrational to only pray...as if we are only souls, and not embodied beings.

-And finally, it is irrational to not include others in our prayers and trouble...as if we are not designed by God for community.

-We ask...**with faith in God**...for what we want, we **trust God** for what he gives.

Jesus said "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" John 14:14

-“In my name” is not a magic incantation...it is a statement that means by his authority or according to his will.

*I have gone in the name of my boss, in previous jobs and said to someone, “I need you to do this” and can you believe it...they did it!

*I am not using his name like magic; I'm certainly not using his name without his direct permission or authority.

-In his name...means in his “will and authority”.

-What we ask, according to God's will...or in his name...he will do. “Then” you might ask, “Why pray at all”?

*Because, he has told us to pray and He has told us that our prayers matter in regards to what he is doing in the world.

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-We can try to work it out like a math problem to be solved...

-or we can obey and experience God.

Look at verse 16

¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

- Here we see you don't just call for spiritual leaders...we are all to pray for one another...and to remain in right relationship with one another.

*Because the prayer of the righteous person has great power...it is tapping into the power of God.

Then, to emphasize the reality that this is for everyone...all followers of Christ...he writes...

¹⁷Elijah 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. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

-Elijah was an unusual man...but James doesn't focus on his special place in history but on the fact that he was a human being...just like us.

*Who is the righteous person? The person who is right with God...Elijah had his ups and downs...just like we do.

-The challenge, as we read scripture, is not just to believe it is true (and it is) but that is "real"...I know that sounds redundant...but sometimes we separate what is true from what is life.

*Some say, "Sure, it's true in a sort of "biblely" way...but it's not real as in my actual life...my life out there." Yes, it is.

*Elijah and I are not the same- Yes, you are.

III. Call to Action

A. Now, many NT letters end with greetings and blessings...but James ends his with a call to action. Of course, he does...gotta love James.

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19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

James is challenging his readers to do what he has been doing in his letter. Truth, we know for James...is **not just content but conduct.**

-So, to wander from the truth is not just to leave biblical beliefs but also biblical behaviors.

True to form, James ends with a call to action on behalf of others...truth applied in community.

Do what the gospel requires of you and call others to the same.- Do what you can do to turn people onto the path of truth.

CONCLUSION

Brett Lenz invited me to come speak to his FCA group at Circle high school...I was there Friday

Their focus for the year has been "What's Your Message"

My point was that, your life message will show up in the hearts and lives of others...or ideally it will.

A sign of that, if it were self-aware, would not think... "I wonder how good I look, I wonder if people think I'm smart, funny, cool." The purpose of a sign is to point to something greater than itself.

*Grand Canyon sign.

-Our life message is not about our own legacy, or what others think of us...but are others actually more closely aligning their lives with the reality of Christ as a result of their interactions with us.

-James is calling his readers to step up and join him in calling others to lives that fully align with the gospel. Life message: Communicate/Demonstrate/Duplicate

-Matt Anderson is our financial advisor and his strategic focus is FAITHFUL INVESTMENT- I love this.

*He says, "We want to help others "level up" personally and professionally."

-This is what James is concluding with...each of us is to take responsibility to help others level up...spiritually, personally.

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-What we do, we don't necessarily do perfectly...but we need to do it purposely..

-We are organized as a church to support faithful investment. People have asked me many times...
“how do I participate in church life?”

*They are looking, sometimes, for a secret door...some hidden way into ministry...that doesn't exist.

-I say, without any intention at being ironic or evasive...walk with Jesus, walk with others...invest your life in others.

-Start with who you are, where you. Over time...faithful investment will turn into real impact.

-James is advocating for this here...specifically in a challenge to turn others back to the truth of God. This will include words and actions.

-James is wrapping up with his main application...

1. watch your heart,

2. align your life with the truth of the gospel,

3. watch your words...

4. now, go after others and call them into the truth.