

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Epistle of James - James 4:11-5:20

Whilst preparing this talk, I was waiting confirmation of a business trip. It seemed obvious to me that the customer had to respond immediately to the proposal, given the urgency of the situation. I had therefore planned to visit the office to organise the work, but although I had prayed about the issue, the customer's response was delayed by one day, leaving me with some domestic arrangements to reorganise. It was a timely reminder of James' admonition: "...you do not know what will happen tomorrow", James 4:14. We'll find each lesson from this final part of the Epistle of James is so practical for us today!

First of all, James concludes his exhortations on ways to achieve peace within the church community with the instruction: "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren", James 4:11. (The address "brethren", "my brethren", or "my beloved brethren", indicates the introduction of a new topic or some emphasis.) Although believers tend not to slander each other to the world outside, it's so easy for them to indulge in the behaviour inside the Christian fellowship. In James 4:11-12 James explains why this is wrong. To speak evil of one another is to speak evil of the law. Furthermore, God is the only Lawgiver. As the Lawgiver, God is the only Person capable of judging properly. In James 2:13, James points out that, even in judgement, God is merciful. God then can either save or destroy. As mere humans, we have a tendency to condemn, even on the basis of incomplete evidence. But the omniscient God is the Saviour God, as the Lord Jesus said: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved", John 3:17.

James has already used strong words for his blunt exhortations in James 4:7-10: Submit to God! Resist the devil! Draw near to God! Cleanse your hands, you sinners! Purify your hearts! Lament! Mourn! Weep! Humble yourselves! Now he strengthens this approach in the next two sections, by the use of the phrase, "Come now", James 4:13 and James 5:1.

First of all, businessmen who scheme their activities independently of God are denounced. They have plans, including diary entries (today or tomorrow, a year here and there); with personnel, places, and activities all identified (we, such a city, to buy and sell); and the outcome predicted (we'll make a profit). This boasting is evil because:

1. There's no guarantee of even another day - "You ... say ... tomorrow we will...whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow", James 4:13-14.
2. Life is very fragile, transient and unpredictable, so ready to disappear from earth into eternity. "For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away", James 4:14.
3. They were proud, ambitious and arrogant, James 4:16. Remember the successful farmer of the parable in Luke 12:13-21, who was so self-confident that he thought within himself to build greater, to get many goods, for many years, so that he could take it easy?
4. God wasn't included in their plans - "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that'" James 4:15. (God said to the Luke 12 farmer, who similarly had no thought of Him: "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you", Luke 12:20.)

As Christians, we should always qualify any plans we make by admitting that they're subject to the will of God. Otherwise we, too, shall be guilty, as James 4:17 states: "Therefore to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." Sin isn't just doing what's wrong, it's also not doing what's right!

A God-dependent attitude completely changes our view of life, especially that of working for a living and enjoying those things which God has given us. To use a current example from my family, my younger son graduated last summer but is still trying to secure permanent employment. After many barren months, he finally got two interviews on the same day! What was he to do? The answer is to seek the will of the Lord: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD", Proverbs 16:33. When we allow for His will in each and every plan we make, we prove "what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God", Romans 12:2.

Next James turns upon those who had achieved their ambitions and had become very rich. He delivers his second severe admonition in James 5:1-6. Several Bible commentators think he wasn't necessarily addressing Christian believers in these verses, because he doesn't call them "brethren". However, we mustn't use this as an excuse for

ignoring his message. The traders of James 4:13-17 may have been occupied with lawful pursuits in accord with Christian ethics, but had ignored the uncertainty of life. But in James 5:1-6, the rich are told to repent because they faced a certain future, the result of their ungodly ways:

- Terrible things were soon coming upon them, James 5:1.
- Their provisions for future security were rapidly disappearing and leaving them exposed. James 5:2, 3, and 5. Riches were rusting through disuse, garments were moth-eaten by infrequent use, and silver and gold were corroding through hoarding. They had heaped up treasure for the difficulties of the last days, but they should have listened to the Lord's advice: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also", Matthew 6:19-21.

These wealthy people were facing judgement because:

1. They had become fraudulently rich, James 5:4
2. The distressing cries of their employees, whom they had cheated, had been heard in heaven, verse 4, - heard by the avenging Almighty God! (The Lord of Sabaoth, the Old Testament name for God as the LORD of Hosts.)
3. They had lived in pleasure and wanton luxury, James 5:5. Selfishly they had indulged themselves and neglected their responsibilities as stewards of the good things that God had given them.
4. They had used their power and influence in corrupt ways resulting in just people being brought to court, wrongly punished, and even murdered, James 5:6.

These verses are very searching to us who live in the materialistic, pleasure seeking age of the twenty-first century, an age in which these social injustices still abound. Let's listen to Scripture:

- "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows ... Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life", 1 Timothy 6:9-10, 17-19.
- "By faith Moses ... [chose] rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward", Hebrews 11:24-26.

James starts his concluding remarks at James 5:7. These conclusions summarise all he has written about to his fellow-countrymen, who had been dispersed from their homeland, Judea. He wanted them to focus on the Lord, rather than on the many trials and temptations they were encountering in the Roman world. "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord." The Jewish farmer was an appropriate example for them to follow. He relied upon God to provide the early rain (to germinate the seeds he sowed in the autumn) and the latter rain in spring (to mature and ripen the crop), before seeing any fruit for his labours. They also were to be patient in waiting upon God's time. Their hearts needed to be established in the certainty and imminence of the Lord's return, James 5:8. Then they would receive the Lord's approval and the crown of life - the fruit of a spiritual harvest.

We know how easy it's to get discouraged, especially when experiencing hardships and injustices for simply being Christians who want to live true to the Lord. How comforting is the message of James 5:8! "You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand". If it was near then, it must be much closer now! It's so easy for Christians to be distracted by the busyness of life in this world, the here and now, and to forget that the Lord is coming. Then a self-indulgent life style, with all its accompanying sinfulness, is just a step away!

It's so easy, too, when experiencing difficulties in the world, for the Christian fellowship to start criticising and blaming each other. Hence James advises: "Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!" James 5:9. I must constantly remind myself that my life will be assessed at the judgement seat of Christ, see 2 Corinthians 5:7-11 and Romans 14:7-13. It would be a good thing if we each thought "the Judge is standing at the door!" every time we meet for Christian fellowship, then love and peace would preside!

James mentions the Old Testament saints who had walked the pathway of faith as a second example of patience. "My, brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience", James 5:10. Sufferings are brought about by the hostile attitude of unbelievers. Patience is enduring adverse circumstances. Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and other prophets can be readily cited as good examples. Their lives

were hard and difficult. They had to endure much opposition to the messages they faithfully declared from God. Jeremiah was put in a pit as a traitor (Jeremiah 10) and Daniel was slandered (Daniel 6), but they remained faithful, as Hebrews 11 shows. They were blessed by God: "As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered", verse 11 (New International Version). The Lord Jesus promises similar blessings to us: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you", Matthew 5:11-12.

However, there are also present rewards, as James shows from his third example of patience, the outstanding Old Testament saint, Job. He exhibited most remarkable features of perseverance in extreme adversity. He lost his wealth (Job 1:13-17), and then his health (Job 2:7). He also lost his beloved children (Job 1:18). His wife was against him, for she said: "Curse God and die", Job 2:9. Even his friends turned against him, accusing him of being a hypocrite (see Job 8:13) and therefore deserving of the things which had happened to him, which they took as being God's punishment. Even though Job didn't understand what was happening to him, he remained faithful to God: "Though [God] slay me, yet will I trust Him... He also shall be my salvation, for a hypocrite could not come before Him", Job 13:15-16.

Not only are we to learn from the life of Job, but we are to appreciate how it displays the full-heartedness of God. In James 5:11 James calls this "the end of the Lord - that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful", a very strong way of describing God's love for His servant. God had His own gracious purpose in allowing Satan access to Job. Job learnt from this extreme trial: "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold ... He is unique, and who can make Him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does", Job 23:10 and 13. Job was humbled and God was glorified, which is what we should desire about any trials that we are called to endure.

As a first priority, James requires that believers live honest lives, which are beyond reproach. "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes" be "Yes", and your "No", "No", lest you fall into judgement", James 5:12. Am I known as a Christian with integrity? True Christian character requires few words, a simple affirmation or denial should be sufficient for anybody to believe me.

James finishes his letter by expanding his teaching of the grace of God with seven references to prayer. The suffering saint who finds himself in trouble or in difficult circumstances can pray, James 5:13. In keeping with James 1:5, it's to be a prayer for wisdom to understand the situation, discern God's will in it, and seek His glory through it. However, the believer is encouraged to sing psalms when things are going well. (Psalms are personal compositions reflecting joy in God.) It's good also to know that God gives "songs in the night", Job 35:10. Recently a friend of mine amazed his doctor when he was told by him that he was terminally ill, with only a few months to live. My friend rejoiced that God, in His goodness, had already granted him "an extra" (he called it) ten years of life since he first encountered ill-health! When the missionaries were suffering in the Philippian jail, Luke poignantly records: "But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God", Acts 16:25.

Next James informs us of a prayer method which may be used by a believer who has some serious illness. He can call the elders of the church. They can pray over him, whilst anointing him (using oil, the medical agent in use in those times), and invoking the name of the Lord, "and the prayer of faith will save the sick", James 5:15. The sick person must have faith that he will be made well, and the elders must have the faith both that the person is genuine, and that it's the Lord's Will. The promise "will save" and "will raise up", is all-important. It emphasises restoration rather than healing. This is further highlighted at the end of James 5:15 where the possibility of the illness being due to sin is stated: "And if he has committed sins [or has been constantly sinning], he will be forgiven". I've known of, seen, and have actively participated in, this procedure for sick believers; it's not a cure for all ills. It's for the exercise of faith, mainly by the person who is ill, relative to the mind of God for his specific situation.

James continues to encourage his readers not to hide sin, but to make a habit of confessing. This is to be done in church, amongst believers in the fellowship. It provides a powerful opportunity for the dynamite, prayer, to be used - "that you may be healed", James 5:16. (Not like the monks, who used to live in the monastery I visited when on holiday recently, whose confession resulted in the Abbot meeting out a suitable punishment!) Effective prayer is prayer by righteous people - a great challenge as we think of what James means by "righteousness" in this letter about practical religion. Elijah is identified as an example in this respect. He prayed for drought, and then three and a half years later, for rain (see 1 Kings 17-19). To encourage us, James describes him: "Elijah was a man just like us", verse 17 (New International Version).

The letter closes with an exhortation for the practice of shepherd care amongst the people of God - to go after the wandering and erring believer. A wonderful promise is given: "... he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins", James 5:20. This is practical religion, which obeys the royal law, as Peter also exhorts: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins'" 1 Peter 4:8.

I'm now going to quote the Conclusion from the Emmaus Bible School study book on James to bring to a climax this *Truth for Today* series of talks: "And so we come to the end of this practical epistle, in which faith is on trial. We have seen faith tested by the problems of life, by unholy temptations, by obedience to the Word of God. The man who says he has faith has been challenged to exhibit it by avoiding partiality or snobbishness and to prove it by a life of good works. The reality of faith is seen in a person's speech; the believer learns to yield his tongue to the Lordship of Christ. True faith is accompanied by true wisdom; the life of envy and strife is exchanged for that of practical godliness. Faith avoids feuds, struggles and jealousies that spring from covetousness and worldly ambition. It avoids a harsh, critical spirit. It avoids self-confidence which leaves God out of life's plans. Faith stands trial by the way it earns and spends money. In spite of oppression, it manifests fortitude and endurance in view of the Lord's return. Its speech is uniformly honest, needing no oaths to attest it. Faith goes to God in all the changing moods of life. In sickness, it first looks for spiritual causes. By confession to God and to those who have been wronged, it removes these possible causes. Finally, faith goes out in love and compassion to those who have backslidden. Your faith and mine are on trial each day. What is the Judge's verdict?"

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