

Picture This

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[0 : 00] Let's look at James chapter 5, starting in verse number 12, and we are going to read down through the end. But above all, my brothers and sisters, 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. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain.

[1 : 21] And for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth. And then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

Father, we are again grateful to receive your word. Thank you for preserving this text for us so that we might learn and grow together.

So that we might have our attention fixed on our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. So that we might be motivated by what you have done, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to follow you more fervently.

Would you be with us as we continue in this time of worship? In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Selfies are popular.

And selfies are popular because they're easy. There is no posing. There is no color coordinating. You just look, and you smile, and you click.

[2 : 56] You take the photo, and it's done. You've got it. Now, group photos, on the other hand, especially with children, this is a whole different thing, isn't it?

An Olympic-level exercise in patience. You can already begin to hear it. Can you stand on your tippy toes for me? You need to fix your collar.

Hey, come over here. You need to put your head between those two people. Are we smiling? Are we being serious with this one? Are we going to, you know, fold our hands in front?

Are our arms going to be crossed? How are we doing this? Wait a minute. I think someone is missing from our family. James' conclusion to his letter feels a little bit like that.

He moves from one person to the next, saying a few words here, and then pivoting to the next person, and saying a few words there. And it's not always clear.

- [3 : 58] How are these words connected? Or are they connected at all? And do they have anything to do with the text that has come before us? But James is not scattered.
- He's gathering the believing community, if you will, into a group photo. And when everyone is finally situated within the frame, it's as though James says, this is what a gospel community looks like.
- This is what a gospel-shaped community is supposed to look like. This is what it looks like when Jesus is present among his people.
- Kids, do you know that moment when a parent or a teacher says, hey, hey, one more thing? What are you expecting when you hear someone say one more thing?
- Could you get me a drink, please? When you hear one more thing, I wonder if it is usually the very most important thing, or if it's just something that they don't want you to forget.
- [5 : 16] Verse 12 begins with James saying something like that. Hey, hey, here's one more thing. This is not the most important thing that James has said in the letter, but it is something that he knows the church cannot afford to forget.
- Look at verse 12. But above all, my brothers and sisters, 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.
- What is happening here? In James' day, people would use a variety of oaths, and these oaths had levels.
- And depending on what you were willing to swear against, the other person could know whether you were telling the truth or how much truth you were telling.
- It might look something like this. If you were swearing by God, if you said, for example, in the Lord's name, or by the Lord's name, this is the most serious, the most binding of all oaths.
- [6 : 43] But then you could come down from that a little bit, and you could swear by the temple, for example. And then you could come down from that a little bit, and you might swear by the altar that is in the temple.
- And then you might swear by Jerusalem, and you might even swear on your own life. And all of these are just various levels of these oaths.
- The kid version might look something like this. Level one. The most binding.
- Cross your heart and hope to die. The most binding. But you might also have, you know, like a double dog dare commitment. That's kind of a big deal.
- Less than cross your heart and hope to die. And then maybe you've got, like, a pinky swear. I mean, after all, it's just a pinky swear, right? Levels. How committed are you to telling the truth?
- [7 : 49] James has something like that in mind here. Neither Jesus nor the New Testament forbids taking an oath.
- So, for example, if you need to go to court, or you need to appear with lawyers and so on, I hope that doesn't happen to any of you, but if you ever, Josh has probably had to do that. If you have to do that and you need to take an oath, that's okay.
- The scripture is not forbidding you from taking an oath. James is addressing this moment when you might say, I will do that tomorrow.
- And the person that you're speaking with says to you, do you promise? That's what James is poking at.
- That moment when someone says, I'm telling the truth. And then they throw out, I swear to God. We're just compounding words to try to make it seem how serious we are.

- [9 : 00] Promises are popular because people are liars. And because he knows that deceit destroys community.
- James forbids propping up your words with extra words to prove that you are telling the truth. He says, just keep it simple. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.
- This is the first person in the photo. The one who speaks. Two more step in. Verse 13. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.
- Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. This is not complicated. If you are suffering any of the various trials that James has described in his letter, you should pray.
- What should you pray for? Pray for wisdom to see this trial from God's perspective. Pray that you would have the patient endurance to endure the trial.
- [10 : 23] Pray that you become more like Jesus by passing through this trial. If you are suffering, pray.
- If, despite the suffering that you are going through, you have courage and joy in the Lord, then praise him.
- Let your gratitude turn into a song. And because James describes these two extremes, pain on the one side and praise on the other, we can all find ourselves somewhere between.
- Somewhere between pain and praise. And wherever you find yourself, turn your attention to God.
- So, perhaps you are weary, but not crushed. Perfect. Turn your attention to God.
- [11 : 29] Perhaps you are content, but not joyful in your contentment. Wonderful. Turn your attention to God. Perhaps you are perplexed, but you are not in despair.
- Amazing. Amazing. Turn your attention to God. Perhaps you are persecuted, and yet you remember, I am not abandoned.
- Beautiful. Turn your attention towards God. Wherever you are, in whatever you are going through, whether it is prayer, or whether it is praise, turn towards God.
- James invites another into the picture. The one who is sick. Verse 14. Is anyone among you sick?
- Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.
- [12 : 43] And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Now, when we say sick, we typically mean something like, you know, a sniffle, or a cold, or a fever, or a cough.
- But biblically, this word can include a whole range of sickness. Physical illness, exhaustion, spiritual weakness, old age even, is encapsulated up into this word.
- But so is also being near death. And it seems as though that's what's happening here.
- This sickness is more severe. So severe that perhaps this person is stuck in their bed. They're bedridden. They can't get out of bed.
- And that's why the elders need to come and pray over him. Since this is early in church history, James probably uses the word elder a little more informally than what we're used to.
- [13 : 58] He probably has in mind respected, wise, probably older men within the community. And when they arrive at the bedside, they ought to gather around this person who is sick and they are to pray.

And not only pray, they are also to anoint the person with oil in the name of the Lord. I want to call your attention this week because last week I called your attention to the fact that when we saw the coming of the Lord in the previous paragraph, it was likely a reference to God the Father.

Lord was referring contextually to God the Father. But here, this phrase in the name of the Lord is used repeatedly throughout the book of Acts.

And it is almost certainly a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. And I think that's wonderful. That they are to pray in the name of the Lord.

This is how we pray as well, isn't it? We pray in Jesus' name. name. This oil is not magic or holy.

[15 : 28] It's just oil. And yet, this action of anointing is meaningful. Think about the Lord's Supper when we gather around the bread and the cup.

Physically, this is just ordinary bread and for us it's just an ordinary sip of grape juice. Some fruit of the vine. But this is spiritually profound.

Why? Well, because we believe that Jesus is gathering with us and that he has prepared this meal for us and he has invited, even commanded us to gather and to celebrate this time of eating this meal together and receiving again all of the grace we need to continue persevering in faith.

Similarly, anointing is a reminder both to the person who is sick but also to those who gather around that Jesus is present here and it is a tangible reminder that Jesus' presence matters and that this becomes a sacred holy moment we are setting this person aside for special attention from the Lord and we are going to pray in the name of the Lord Jesus for healing to come to this seriously ill person and if it is his will Jesus' will then the prayer of faith will result in healing wonderful wonderful now in the ancient world sickness was often connected to sin you hear this for example in the disciples question to

Jesus in the opening of John chapter 9 when they say Rabbi who sinned and then they set up this false dichotomy who sinned was it his parents or was it this man that resulted in him being born blind for them there was only two things either his parents must have been sinners serious sinners or he must be a serious sinner or else he would not have been born blind so it is that when James talks about prayer for the sick he naturally includes the forgiveness of sin and then he expands on this idea and I love this in verse 16 therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed when you sin where do you go with your guilt who do you turn to when you have guilt what do you reach for to quiet your conscience if you believe that

[19 : 02] Jesus bore your sin in his body on the cross then you can be sure of this confessing your sin will not lead to condemnation from Jesus it leads to grace we remember James chapter 4 he gives more grace and so followers of Jesus should be the kinds of people who humbly regularly confess our sins to one another and we should be the kinds of people who humbly gently graciously receive confession of sin from one another and when that sin is confessed yes there may be earthly consequences it may be just the first baby step towards healing and restoration and reconciliation but it begins here

James says when you receive a confession of sin pray do you see that pray pray pray for one another that you may be healed healed spiritually in other words forgiven and in some cases healed physically raised up by the Lord God now you may be tempted to think that this kind of prayer must certainly require a master's level degree in spirituality but James is quick to correct that assumption and he clears it up with a well-known Old Testament example and I want you to notice the surprising emphasis he puts on this example look at verse 16 the second half of the verse the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working

Elijah 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 and then he prayed again and heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit Elijah is a well known Old Testament example of a righteous person and James uses this word righteous in the same way that we've seen it elsewhere in this text he's not using it in the way that we see Paul use it later on it's the Old Testament sense of righteous a righteous person is one who loves God's law and seeks God's will and lives for God's glory That's a righteous person.

So Elijah was righteous. But notice what James says immediately after introducing Elijah, verse 17. He was a man with a nature like ours.

In other words, Elijah was not a superhuman. He is flesh and blood with fears and frustrations and weekdays and weary nights, even depression.

[22 : 46] And yet, despite his humanity, humanity like ours, despite his humanity, God hears Elijah's prayer.

And God answers him. And through the prayers of this ordinarily righteous person, God brings both physical and spiritual healing.

Two more people step into the photo. A sinner and a seeker. Look at verse 19. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This matters to me. So I just want to point it out. My brothers and sisters, this is the fifth time James has used this word in chapter 5. And the tenth time he's used it overall in this letter.

This is about community. This is about one another. First, the sinner. It could be that this person has left the gathering of God's people.

[24 : 19] It could be that this person has abandoned faith altogether. But what we know from the text is that the person has wandered from the truth.

Do you see that there in your Bible? It could be bigger than that. But what we know is that there's a wandering from the truth. They know the gospel. They know about Jesus.

They know that his words and ways are meant to shape their life. But something happens. There is a veering away.

There is a pulling back. Perhaps a subtle change in belief. A drifting from the life that flows freely from Jesus.

A cooling of the heart that once burned hot for God's glory. Perhaps a return to old sins.

[25 : 23] Perhaps an embrace of pride or bitterness or anger or malice. Perhaps an unwillingness to be present.

To be known. To be loved. And then here comes the seeker.

Praise God for seekers. Praise God for brothers and sisters who refuse to take no for an answer. For those who notice us in our weakness.

For those who see us in our shame. For those who pursue us in our isolation. For those who speak truth to confront the adversary's lies.

Praise God for those who urge repentance. And for those who humbly invite confession. For those who work towards restoration.

[26 : 33] Praise God for those who say, come on. Come on. This is the way back. Will you go with me?

This is the way back. And I'm going to limp beside you. And we are going to go together to Jesus at the throne of grace.

James encourages seekers with these words of affirmation that I think should be so meaningful to us. If that wanderer returns.

If that wanderer returns. Seeker, you need to know something. You need to know that you have participated in something holy. By leading the wanderer back to forgiveness in Jesus.

You have partnered with God in covering a multitude of sins. You have rescued a soul from death. Restoring a wanderer, you see.

[27 : 49] Is not the start of a rescue mission. If you commit to being a seeker, you're not starting the rescue mission. You are joining the rescue party that Jesus has already begun.

He is the good shepherd. He came to seek and to save the lost. He pursues wanderers.

And when you seek after a wanderer, then you are walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Look at the people that James gathers into this portrait.

The speaker. The sufferer. The singer. The sick. The sinner. The seeker. They're all here. They're all here. But my brothers and sisters, what if this is not just a portrait of them?

What if this is intended to be a selfie of us? This is a snapshot of what life looks like when Jesus is known.

[29 : 07] When Jesus is loved. When Jesus is followed by his people. When Jesus stays in focus.

A gospel-shaped community develops. Promises are popular because people are liars.

So let's speak the truth. So consistently. So predictably plainly. That you don't need a promise, a pinky swear, or a cross your heart.

This week. I wonder if we can pay attention to those moments when your yes or no is tested. This one might hurt.

Those moments when you tell your kids, I will help you in five minutes. And the next thing you know, 20 minutes has gone by.

[30 : 10] How about when you commit to a customer or a co-worker? I will get that to you by end of day tomorrow.

Or when you say, I will do that. But then you feel the need to add, I promise. Or I swear.

Children, you can think about when you say, I will clean my room. Or I didn't make that mess. Or young people, I will sweep the floor after one more page or one more game or one more episode.

Tell the truth. Do what you say. Ask the Spirit to make you trustworthy. So that your words and actions align with the gospel of Jesus.

The one who is the way, the truth, and the life. Second, whether you are suffering, celebrating, or somewhere in between, turn your attention to God.

[31 : 20] Turn your attention to God. If you are facing a trial, pray. If you are rejoicing, praise. If you are weary, or you are unsure, or you are insecure, your Savior Jesus says to you again this morning, come to me and I will give you rest.

And if you have never come to Jesus, today would be a wonderful day to do that for the very first time. By his perfect life, and by his obedient death on the cross, Jesus has already done everything that is necessary to forgive your sin and welcome you into this motley crew that is the family of God.

Call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, the scripture says, and you will be saved. My friends, we cannot obey the letter of James without also meeting the practical needs that need to be met.

We cannot obey the letter of James with that faith. That dead faith that doesn't work to care for others in their affliction.

We cannot obey the letter of James if we say that we love God, but we are slicing and dicing up the greatest commandment and refusing to love our neighbor as ourselves.

[33 : 07] We cannot obey the letter of James if we hear someone say, I am fine, and then we just move on because we are too North Dakota nice to be a seeker.

So let's love with the love of Jesus. When someone is sick, be present and pray for them.

When someone confesses, be gentle, compassionate, and gracious. When someone wanders, please don't assume someone else is seeking after them.

Go to them. Be empathetic. Be quick to hear and slow to speak. And when you do speak, please, above all, remind them of the promises of God and the forgiveness of Jesus and the steadfast love of the Father.

And when someone returns, celebrate God's grace like the good shepherd who rejoices because he has found his sheep that was lost.

[34 : 22] Kids, you can get in on this too. You know what it's like to feel left out. You know what it feels like when you don't get an opportunity to participate.

Be on the lookout for someone this week who needs a friend. Someone who needs encouragement. Someone who might just need a smile and a kind word.

We can all ask ourselves this question. Who can I seek out in Jesus' love this week?

In James, we discover that steadfastness through suffering results in the delightful gift of becoming wiser with Jesus.

And this wisdom that we have learned about over the last several weeks, it is shaping us in a particular way in humble holiness, in gentle reasonableness, in merciful goodness.

[35 : 25] We are learning, aren't we? To make our faith visible by the words we speak, by the needs that we meet, by the leaders that we choose to follow.

Through our lives that are being changed by the gospel, we are evidence of God's ongoing work of redemption. And as we draw near to God, we know that he is drawing near to us.

And he is forming us into this community of Jesus' followers. And so, my beloved brothers and sisters, may our faith not remain alone.

May truth become more natural. May prayer become more instinctive. May confession become more safe.

May healing become more normal. May restoration become more usual. And may more wanderers join us as we limp together towards Jesus.

[36 : 41] By God's grace, let's be doers of the word and not hearers only. Let's pray. Amen.