

James chapter 5

Characteristics of evil rich people (verses 1-6)

James begins the final chapter of his Epistle with a discussion of rich people who are evil. James is not condemning riches, he is condemning evil practices in accumulating wealth. There is a difference between accumulating wealth honestly and what James describes here.

James predicts “miseries that are come upon you” in the same way that Jesus pronounces “woes” upon the rich in Luke 6:24-26. The riches of the wealthy are “corrupted” and their garments are “moth-eaten” just as Jesus also described in Matthew 6:19-21. Their gold and silver are “corroded”, or rusted. This is in consequence of the unrighteous rich hoarding their possessions rather than using them for good. This corrosion will be a witness against the rich and eat their flesh “like fire”. They have heaped up treasures much like the rich fool Jesus described in Luke 12:13-21. Their end will be the same. Jesus taught a great deal about the proper value of possessions in Luke 12:22-34.

Why are the rich condemned so fiercely? James explains in verses 4-6. These evil rich people had defrauded their workers by holding back their wages. Here is the sin of the evil rich. The cries of the defrauded workers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, which literally means, “Lord of Hosts”, specifying God. This is the same title for God used by the Apostle Paul in Romans 9:29. What the rich people had done was a violation of the Law of Moses (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15).

While the rich had cheated their workers out of their wages they had also “lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury”. They have “fattened” their hearts while robbing the poor. In addition, they had even “condemned and murdered” the just, in this case, the poor. The just people did not resist this abusive practice (James 2:5-6).

The importance of patience (verses 7-12)

“Therefore be patient, brethren”. James commands the believers to exercise patience while they wait for “the coming of the Lord”. In verse 7, James mentions the second coming of Christ for the first time. He uses the example of the farmer to illustrate how believers are to work patiently while looking for the Lord’s return. The farmer waits for the early and latter rain and plants the crops accordingly. In the same way James commands believers to be patient a second time in verse 8 and also to “establish your hearts” for the “coming of the Lord is at hand”.

As a part of this patience, and in anticipation of the Lord’s return, believers are commanded not to grumble against each other (James 4:11-12). If they do grumble against each other they must realize that “the judge is standing at the door” (yet another reference to the soon return of Jesus).

James refers to the example of the Old Testament prophets in an appeal for the readers to exercise patience (verse 10). These prophets are held up as an example of faithfulness in the face of suffering (Matthew 5:12). The writer of the book of Hebrews mentions some of these prophets in Hebrews chapter 11:30-40. Since his readers were familiar with the Old Testament writings James was able to say, “Indeed we count them blessed who endure” (verse 11).

Then James seizes upon the one Old Testament example that everyone is familiar with: Job. We have all heard of the patience (perseverance) of Job. We know that Job lost everything he had, his children, his possessions, his health, and even had to endure his wife's pleadings to "curse God and die" (Job 1:13-22; 2:7-9, 11-13). Job also patiently endured the critiques of his three friends who came to talk with him. The readers of this Epistle would have been very familiar with these passages. James also knew that they understood the blessings that God bestowed on Job because of his faithfulness and patience (Job 42:10, 12, 16). Truly, "the Lord is very compassionate and merciful" (verse 11). Job is an example of patience even to us.

Verse 12 does not seem to fit into the general train of thought concerning patience. In this verse, James gives commands concerning swearing. He essentially commands us not to swear (take an oath) at all. We are not to swear to do something by heaven or by earth, or any other oath. James' teaching in this verse is almost exactly the same as that of Jesus (Matthew 5:33-37) and he undoubtedly learned it from that source. What James (and Jesus) are teaching us is that the word of a Christian must be absolutely true and honest. If Christians will make sure that their "yes is yes" and their "no is no" then they will not be compelled to swear that what they say is the truth. If our neighbors and associates know that our words are true then we will fulfill the command of James, if not, we "will be judged".

Specific needs (verses 13-20)

The last section of the Epistle contains various commands concerning specific situations. The first explains what Christians should do if they are suffering. James tells

the sufferer that they should pray. If a person is cheerful they should sing songs (Ephesians 5:19-20; Colossians 3:16-17). If a person is sick they should call for the elders of the church. When the elders are summoned they are commanded to pray over the sick person and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

In the First century people did not have the opportunity for medical care available to us today. One of the most common medicinal practices was to anoint injured or sick persons with oil (usually olive oil). This practice is highlighted in the parable of the good Samaritan who poured oil upon the wounds of the man he found in the ditch (Luke 10:34). In this case, James urges more than just the ordinary, physical anointing of oil. He is commanding a spiritual response as well.

We know that the Apostles and other early Christians possessed the miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit (Mark 6:13; 16:17-18). We know that they were able to perform wonderful miracles and healings that are not available to believers today who do not possess the miraculous measure of the Spirit. The purpose of these miracles was to confirm the Word of God.

James is commanding that those who are sick should call the elders of the church to their home for an anointing that goes beyond the physical and medicinal benefits of oil. The anointing, combined with the prayers of the elders was to have a dramatic effect: the saving of the sick. James promises that the “Lord will raise him up” and “if he has committed sins he will be forgiven”. Examples of miraculous healings abound in scripture (Acts 5:15-16; 19:11-12). While the ability to heal people today miraculously does not continue, it is the writer’s belief that James is describing a

ministry of elders throughout the church age. We know that prayer changes things. We also believe that God can heal anyone. If the church would take seriously what James proposes here the prayers and intercessions made on behalf of the sick would become more effective. If elders were summoned to the homes of those who were sick it would exhibit the type of faith that James has been describing throughout this Epistle.

James then discusses the confession of sins. He commands that we confess our sins to each other. He does not expect a person to enter a confessional and confess their sins to a hidden priest. He does expect Christians to confess their sins to each other. He is also not describing what typically takes place in most Churches of Christ. In most churches an invitation song is sung to allow individuals to come before the congregation if they need to confess their sins. This is done as a matter of convenience but is nowhere found in the Word of God. A Christian does not need to wait until the services of the church and come forward in order to carry out what James is describing.

When we sin we should confess our sins to our brothers and sisters and allow them to pray for us. As James describes, “pray for one another that you may be healed”. It seems that James is referring back to the previous thought of elders coming to the homes of the sick. In this situation, James says that if we confess our trespasses and pray for each other we will be healed (perhaps a reference not only to spiritual healing, but also physical healing).

James describes the type of prayer that is needed in verse 16, “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”. Christian men and women have a

wonderful opportunity to impact the spiritual well-being of their brothers and sisters.

Our prayers on behalf of the sinner are effective and James offers proof.

He describes Elijah as a man “like us” who prayed that it would not rain and it did not rain for three and one-half years (1 Kings 17:1). Then Elijah prayed again and the rain fell once more (1 Kings 18:1). Elijah was a man like us. Our prayers can be as effective as his if only we will pray in faith.

James concludes his Epistle with the teaching that if a person turns away from the truth through sin and someone else turns them back and prays for them, then they “will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins”. Each Christian has the ability to pray on behalf of their brothers or sisters who fall away from the truth. Surely this will cause us to think of prayer more soberly and faithfully than perhaps we have in the past. God is at work in concert with His children to insure that Christians remain faithful and receive the crown of life.