

# Study 6: James Chapter 5

## **Introduction**

James provides some further information on the cause of the in-fighting that was occurring within the local congregations, and gives practical instructions on what to do about the situation. The cause of the problem was external, and they needed patience to deal with it. Rather than supporting one another through their trials, they were blaming each other.

## **Body of the Study**

**Condemnation of the Rich**

**A call to patience**

**Instructions concerning oaths**

**Instructions concerning prayer**

**Final appeal**

## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study*

*Read the whole book again in a single sitting*

*In what areas of your life are you impatient, and how do the three examples from James provide some ways in which you can learn patience and improve?*

*What different types of prayer are mentioned in this passage? How and when can you use these different types of prayer in your life?*

## Notes for study 6: James Chapter 5

### **Introduction**

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### **Condemnation of the Rich**

James begins a new train of thought, which is marked by “Come now...” (NKJV) or “Now listen...” (NIV). The passage almost resembles the voices of the prophets who were declaring God’s coming judgement on the (various) nations because they did not repent. In this case, the judgement is against the rich, which raises the question as to which rich that he has in mind. It could be the rich in the church, although the context seems to sit better with the rich outside of the church (as with 2:6-7). The problem then, is that it is highly unlikely that any of them would be reading the letter to do anything about it. But this is a parallel situation to the prophets of old who delivered God’s message of doom because of their actions (or lack of them). The prophecies were made so that the readers would know and understand how God viewed things, and that the actions that followed were not coincidences, but rather the actions of a righteous God bringing judgement against those who opposed Him.

In this case, the rich have set themselves up as self-sufficient and self-righteous and ignored the plight of the poor. They had in effect stolen the money that was due to the poor for wages when they didn’t even need the money themselves. The poor were living hand-to-mouth, and depriving them of the wages meant that they would go hungry and may lead to starvation. This was in contrast to the rich who just added to the excessive stores held in their barns. God was not going to let the situation continue, and He would bring about the circumstances that would correct it “...*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you...*” (5:1 NIV). The rich had so much wealth that they didn’t need the excess that they were depriving from the poor, and their clothes were going to holes “...*Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ...*” (5:2-3 NIV). Whilst gold and silver are inert metals that do not corrode, James is speaking metaphorically, that the rich had had them so long that they were just rotting away.

The crime committed by the rich is quite explicit – they had fraudulently held back their wages “...*Indeed the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the Lord of Sabaoth...*” (5:4 NKJV). The Lord has heard their cry, and He will take action. *Sabaoth* means *Almighty*. In contrast to the poor who are struggling, the rich have lived a life of excess “...*You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter...*” (5:6 NIV).

James sums up the charge against the rich “...*You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you...*” (5:6 NIV). The charge seems strong considering what has been said above. However, many of these poor would have been living hand-to-mouth, and not having the wages that was due to them they would have been starving, and quite likely many of them would have starved to death. Their appeals to the rich appears to have fallen on deaf ears, and by their lack of response they were in effect condemned to die of starvation.

### **A call to patience**

The next session is addressed to the Christians who were suffering from the actions of the rich “...*Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord...*” (5:7 NKJV). The expression

*the coming of the Lord* at first glance might refer to His return at the Second Coming. However James says that it is *at hand* (5:8). Within the context of the chapter, it is when the Lord brings retribution to those who were causing hardship for the Christians. James connects the thoughts plainly by “*therefore...brethren*”. James is admonishing them to be patient (Everett<sup>1</sup> describes this as “long-tempered”) in the face of their trials from their oppressors, and with each other. Everett adds:

I think this “coming of the Lord” is the coming of the Lord in judgement against the Jewish state. ...Jesus had predicted the end of the Jewish state with the downfall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple (Mt. 24:1-35; Lk. 21:5-33). That judgement would bring relief to the brethren from the oppression of the rich Jews and has been previously described as the day when their treasure shall testify against them. It was to be a day of their slaughter (vv. 3, 5).

James gives some illustrations to support his chain-of-thought. The first of these is the farmer. “...*See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain...*” (5:7 NKJV). When the farmer plants his crop, he has to then rely on God to bring the rain for it to set and grow. If he gets impatient and storms up and down, it won't help! He just has to be patient, knowing that in God's time the rains will come and the crop will set by the early rain, and it will grow to maturity when the rains come later in the season.

The instruction to the brethren is clear “...*You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand...*” (5:8 NKJV). However, James is also strong in the application of the instruction “...*Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold the Judge is standing at the door!...*” (5:9 NKJV). With the oppression that was against them, the brethren must have felt very despondent, and were grumbling about the situation. But it had gone further than that – they were getting irritated at one another, and were grumbling against the brethren. James reminds them that God is the righteous Judge, we need to let Him do the judging, not us (4:11-12), and that the time for His judgement is soon (5:9).

The second example of patience is the prophets of old “...*Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord...*” (5:10 NIV). There are numerous examples of the OT prophets who felt discouraged by their situation and the extensive sin around them, and the revolt against God.

In their position as God's representatives, they experienced affliction and responded to it with long-suffering patience. Although James refers to “the prophets” as a group, Jeremiah certainly stands out as one who endured mistreatment with patience. He was put in the stocks (Jer 20:2), thrown into prison (32:2), and lowered into a miry dungeon (38:6); yet he persisted in his ministry without bitterness or recrimination. Such men constitute an “example” for believers who are oppressed and mistreated. (NIVBC)

The third example of patience is Job, who was known because of it. The brethren are reminded of the esteemed place that the prophets are held “...*As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about...*” (5:11 NIV). The story of Job gives us great insight into what is happening when we face suffering. Job had not done anything, but Satan inflicted great conflict on to him. At the end of the story, God brought about justice, and it was said that *the latter days of Job were better than the beginning* (Job 42:12). Just like the reward of Job, God will reward us when we show faithfulness with patience, for “...*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy...*” (5:11 NIV).

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<sup>1</sup> Everett, p.73

### **Instructions concerning oaths**

The construction of the language is such that James instructs the brethren to cease the action of using oaths, so it must have been something that they were doing. “...Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned...” (5:12 NIV). The instruction *do not swear* is often confused with the use of profanity and foul language. Whilst that is condemned elsewhere, the discussion here is about the use of oaths. The most common (in our society) is the use of oaths – swearing in – in a court of law. However, the formal use of oaths in circumstances such as a law court is not the topic of discussion here either. The New International Bible Commentary says:

It should be obvious that what is referred to in Matthew and James is the light, casual use of oaths in informal conversation--not formal oaths in such places as courts of law. God himself is said to have taken an oath (Ps 110:4), and Paul sometimes called God to witness (2Co 1:21; Gal 1:20). Rather than employing an oath to convince people that a statement is true, Christians should let their "Yes" be yes, and their "No," no. That is, they should be honest in all their speech so that when they make an affirmation or denial, people will know it is unquestionably the truth. In the careless use of oaths people are in danger of taking God's name in vain, for which they will come under judgment (cf. Ex 20:7). (NIVBC).

Everett<sup>2</sup> adds:

All men should realize that swearing by something sacred does not change a lie into truth. Swearing may be necessary in civil matters where men do not have a respect for truth for the sake of truth. But among disciples a man's word should be his bond; therefore, his yea should be yea – a compelling need for more indicates an evil intent...

### **Instructions concerning prayer**

This section should be read in the context of the flow of the chapter (and of course, the context of the letter). The brethren were suffering because of the trials inflicted onto them by the rich. They needed to be patient and not retaliate. Some of them were getting frustrated, and were getting nasty with their brethren, and blaming the brethren for their predicament, rather than those who were truly the cause. As a result they were grumbling against one another (5:9). They were making false accusations, and trying to back them up by swearing an oath. Rather than blaming the brethren, James reminds them that they need to take their burdens to the Lord “...*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray...*” (5:13 NIV). Conversely, there is a natural reaction to being happy “...*Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise...*” (5:13 NIV).

The next verse is somewhat perplexing, and there are a great many views as to what it means. “...*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...*” (5:14 NIV). One commonly held view is that our physical sicknesses can be miraculously healed, and that all we have to do is to ask. The modern proponents of this will call for the evangelist to come and do the healing, where James says that the ones to come are the elders (plural). There are different types of sicknesses (some physical, some mental, and some spiritual), and different types of healing are required. The passage does not say that all kinds of illness can be cured. In modern usage, the practices of this passage are often followed only when a serious or even a terminal illness occurs.

Again, we need to look at the context of this verse. The brethren were suffering, and often starving, and they were emotionally upset (hence the difficult interactions between them that James has addressed). When we get run down, we are subject to all sorts of different illnesses.

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<sup>2</sup> Everett p. 76

We have the blessings of modern medicine to provide medicines that can help our bodies fight our frequent illnesses. Very often we feel a lot better after just talking with the doctor about our troubles. The people who can help us deal with the trials of life are the elders – *they watch out for your souls* (Heb 13:17).

On the other hand, some of the elders in the NT times had miraculous powers (which were given by the laying on of the hands of the apostles Acts 8:17-18; Eph 4:8-11; 2 Tim 1:6), although there is no evidence to suggest that it extended to all elders. When Jesus' disciples miraculously cast out some demons, they also *anointed with oil many that were sick* (Mk 6:13). So, there is an association of the anointing with oil and healing, although it may be symbolic. James almost says as much when he adds “...*And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up...*” (5:15 NIV). The thing that does the healing is not the miraculous application of the oil, but *the prayer offered in faith*. The guilt that follows from our sin can often bring us down, and cause us to be sick, and by confessing our sins, God will forgive us (1 Jn 1:9). When we call for the elders (the shepherds of our souls), and we pray together with them, James assures us “...*If he has sinned, he will be forgiven...*” (5:15 NIV).

We are assured of the power of prayer, and the need to confess our sins to one another “...*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...*” (5:16 NIV).

A great example of the power of prayer comes from Elijah (1 Kin 17:1; 18:42-45) “...*Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops...*” (5:17-18 NIV). Elijah found himself in many testing circumstances, and he felt his inadequacies just as much as we do. Yet, he was faithful to God, and knew that He would answer prayers if it was His will to do so. God's response to Elijah was to answer his prayers and grant his requests.

### ***Final appeal***

The letter concludes with James' final appeal to the brethren “...*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins..*” (5:19-20 NIV). We need to remember what is happening amongst the churches. Their faith was being tested by the situation that they were in, and many of them were consequently acting in inappropriate ways. The role of the elders was to guide them and bring them back to the Lord. However James makes the point that we all have this responsibility, not just the elders.

A few things from these verses are obvious. Firstly, we can wander from the truth. It's like when we go for a walk in the country with a group of people. Sometimes we wander off. We don't necessarily deliberately want to leave the group, we just get distracted by something that looks interesting along the way. Before we know it we are separated. In the same way, we can become separated from God. We need to be guided back. Secondly, James describes those who wander from the truth as being *in error*. We need to come back to God, and come back to the truth. Thirdly, the consequence of the error is death (spiritual death). This verse shows the certainty that we are not in a “once saved – always saved” relationship with God, but only if we remain in the truth.