

## JAMES 5: “THE POWER OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER”

(09/02/18)

Scripture Lesson: James 5:1-20

*“Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16)*

This morning we are concluding our six-part series on the Book of James. I hope you have found this little book enlightening and helpful in your own spiritual journey!

I confess I do always find it to be so. I am still not sure why the church fathers saw fit to include in the canon an epistle to the early Christian churches that makes little to no mention of Jesus, especially when so many of the Gnostic gospels that were left out contain quotes or sayings of Jesus that do not appear in the synoptic gospels. In addition, I find myself in basic disagreement with much of James’s theology.

In my defense, I am not alone in this. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther *hated* the Book of James! He could not understand why it was included in the canon, and he would have had it removed if he had had the power to do so. Luther’s basic complaint was with James’s emphasis on the importance of works, of living a good and Christian life, as either the way to salvation or as an indicator of the attainment of salvation. Luther came down very strongly on the side of the apostle Paul and Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, in their emphasis on not only the importance but the actual *primacy* of grace and faith as the means to salvation!

This is not my criticism of James. In fact, I believe Martin Luther was unfair to James in this criticism. James never says that we can be saved by works alone or even primarily by works. He does say that we cannot be saved by the kind of faith that does not give rise to or find expression in a spirit of charity. I not only agree with James in this, I consider the matter of faith without works as an oxymoron, as something that simply cannot be. If we understand faith as the quality of our relationship with God, I do not see how a person of any religious persuasion could possibly have a deep personal relationship with God, or a person of the Christian faith could possibly have taken on the heart and mind of Jesus, and not have this faith bear fruit in deeds of loving kindness!

My complaint is in regard to the dualistic thinking that not only finds expression in but actually permeates James’s letter. It sounds to me like James regards heaven as

good and the world as bad or fallen; God as good and human beings as sinful or evil. When James tells us that to befriend the world is to become an enemy of God, he and I part company. I am willing to admit that James may have meant becoming lost in what we might call worldliness, but I still do not believe that this would make one an *enemy* of God. I see James's theology as an expression of the dichotomization of sacred and secular that has permeated Christian theology for the last two millennia and has left us with an unhealthy understanding of the Christian's relationship with the world and that has contributed to the callous poisoning and destruction of nature, of the environment.

Don't get me going on this or I will never get to the real gold in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter! Note how James excoriates rich people not only in this chapter but in previous chapters. I don't know what James has against rich people, but he sure doesn't seem to like them! He tells them that miseries are right around the corner! He says,

*Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire.*

I don't want to be really picky, but this is technically not true since neither gold nor silver can rust; only iron rusts. Silver, but not gold, can tarnish or oxidize. This is why it is not a good idea to look at the Bible as a scientific document and as a statement of inerrant truth. However, to be fair to James, when we read these verses in context we get the sense that James was not excoriating the rich just for being rich, but for building their riches on the labors and the oppression of others. If this is James's point, it is a profound one and one with which I stand in agreement. James says,

*The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.*

We now know that many of our material possessions come from sweatshops, and that they are inexpensive because they were produced from the exploitation of laborers in third-world countries. We also know how much of the wealth of our country, at least in the early years, was built on the backs of African slaves. James's prophetic confrontation here should give us serious pause.

This morning, however, I would like us to focus on two sections of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> chapters that I believe contain real gold! At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, James confronts

not only our tendency to try to control life, but our mistaken notion, our delusion that life is under our control. He says,

*Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.*

James tells us that although we make our plans as if we could foresee the future, this is not the case. We do not even know what will happen to us tomorrow! I agree with James in this, though not for the reason he gives. James, like so many of the early Christian theologians, believed that the Second Coming, the end of the world, the end of time was just around the corner. James tells his listeners (for these letters were meant to be read aloud to the early Christians, the majority of whom could not read or write),

*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. . . . Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.*

As you know, I am not a big fan of the apocalypse, the belief in the Second Coming of Christ in all his glory, at least as understood literally. It didn't happen in Jesus' disciples' time, in James's time or Paul's. It didn't occur at the end of the first millennium or at the end of the second millennium, which we observed eighteen or nineteen years ago. I understand the psychological desire to tie up loose ends and have God bring things to some kind of conclusion or closure, but I believe the Second Coming will be an inner spiritual event, not an outer cosmological showdown between God and Satan.

There I go again, disagreeing with James! However, I am not disagreeing with what he says about not being able to control the future, only with why he believes this.

I think we all know that the future is not under our control. People who suffer from anxiety can attest to this! The more they obsess about the future, trying to plan for every contingency, trying through their consciously or unconsciously constructed compulsions and rituals to ward off anticipated harm, the more they hurt themselves emotionally and somatically, the more they cut themselves off from living their life deeply and fully in the present. People who have been wounded by some unfortunate circumstance: the loss of a job, the loss of one's health or mental capacity, or the death of a loved one, can attest that life is not under our control and the future does not always

unfold as we plan it. James tells us to go ahead and plan the future, but he suggests that we should always add the following contingency: “God willing and if the crick don’t rise!”

The real (non-rustable) gold in this passage is where James tells us, “For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” I like this! It is very Buddhist in its focus on the emergence of form and the dissolving of a form back into the great Unity.

The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *No Death; No Fear*, suggests that we think of our life as the emergence of a temporary, an impermanent form. It is like a wave that emerges from the ocean. For a short period of time the wave is distinguishable from other waves; it can be located in space and time. But just as it arose out of the convergence of a certain set of conditions, so it dissolves when these conditions are no longer present. Does the wave then cease to exist? Perhaps it does if we think of the identity of the wave as the observable manifestation of this particular form. But the wave in its essence is simply water. It is of the same basic stuff as the ocean. It *is* the ocean. How, then, could it cease to exist?

A mist is like this. There is water in the air, in the atmosphere. When certain conditions are present, high humidity accompanied by a decrease in temperature, we can see a mist or a fog. When the temperature changes, the mist dissolves back into the air, or it evaporates from the ground back into the clouds, only to manifest again. I think James’s very Buddhist metaphor is a profoundly poetic way to depict the impermanence, the transience of our life!

Finally, James speaks with conviction of the power of prayer. He tells us of the power of our prayers of confession. Several years ago, I discovered that an open, honest, communal prayer of confession was an integral part of the small group worship in the early church. James says, “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

I am sorry to say that in most Christian churches we do not do this! We cling to what M. Scott Peck, in his book *A Different Drum*, calls *pseudo-community*. We try to keep our image, our persona intact. When we do so, we place a glass ceiling on our relationships, on the development of true community, and on our spiritual growth. The communal prayer of confession, which was abandoned over the centuries as a part of

Christian worship, is an integral part of individual psychotherapy and of groups like Alcoholic Anonymous, where members who share openly and honestly at their meetings discover the role of confession in the healing process.

James tells us that no matter what befalls us in this life, whether weal or woe, we should pray. He says,

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.*

With regard to healing, and the healing power of intercessory prayer, James says,

*Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.*

James then ends with a note of assurance when he says,

*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.*

This is the verse that our church has chosen to express our faith, our belief in the power of intercessory prayer. It guides us in our prayer and moves us to reach out to others in both word and deed, in our prayers and in our efforts to provide comfort and assistance to those of our brothers and sisters who are struggling with life.

In conclusion, I guess we could say that James isn't perfect! In this, I suspect he is a lot like all of us (even a lot like me)! I have a hunch that some of you who are here this morning have disagreed with or have taken offense at something I have preached in the almost twenty-one years that I have been with you. If we focus only on our points of disagreement, our relationship will suffer, and our spiritual growth will be diminished. If we listen for the little gems that are sprinkled throughout our discourse, as we have tried to do with James (and as I hope you do with my sermons), I think we will discover the true gold that can shape and guide our spiritual journey both as individuals and as a community of faith.

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