
James

Lesson 5

“James Chapter 5”

Objective: To provide an exegetical analysis for this chapter and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in understanding our role as Christians living in the 21st century and so create a summation for this book.

Materials:


- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

Procedures

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- 1.** To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.
 - 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
 - 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
 - 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

^{5:1} Come now the rich ones, weep, crying aloud because of the miseries that are coming upon you. ^{5:2} Your wealth has rotted and your clothing has become moth-eaten. ^{5:3} Your gold and silver have rusted and their corrosion will be a witness to us and it will consume your flesh as fire. You have stored up treasure in the last days. ^{5:4} Behold the wages of the workers reaping your field the ones being defrauded by you he cries out, and the shouts of the ones reaping have entered the ears of the Lord of hosts. ^{5:5} You have lived self-indulgently and luxuriously upon the earth, you have fed your heart in the days of slaughter, ^{5:6} you have condemned, murdered the righteous, they did not oppose you.

The words of James come full force in this last chapter upon the necks of the rich. It is likely that what James has to say here is not so much a plea to the rich for repentance as it is a pronouncement of judgment on the rich that will bring encouragement to the poor who are enduring hardship because of the rich. The introductory formula “come now” (*ἄγε νῦν*) links the grim preview of the judgment day here in chapter 5 with the critique of the presumptuous, profit-driven merchants of 4:13-17. The prophecy of James is first a call of encouragement to the poor



and only secondarily a warning to the oppressors to repent. The poor have no reason to envy the rich who are on the road to destruction.¹

Some have seen the rich being referred to here as a reference to the Sadducees and the chief priests and the Jerusalem elite² and though there is a certain amount of appeal to this proposal it seems far from certain. It certainly is possible that the people of the diaspora would have had a bad experience upon one of their pilgrimages to Jerusalem, but the harvesting of the fields does not seem to fit with such imagery. The overall reference to the rich and how they acquired their wealth would seem to be far more general than a reference to just those particular rich in Jerusalem. It is perhaps the case that those of us who live in the west would prefer this to be a reference to this particular people and to vilify them, but perhaps the call should not be deflected so quickly. The indictment of James is meant to provide comfort and

¹ Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2004), pp. 401-402.

² N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, in the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 33-34.

encouragement to the poor and for many of the poor who live in our era those of the west are certainly seen as “the rich.”

The words of James are made to make your head snap around to look sharply at what he is talking about. He is challenging his audience to be kingdom people, with kingdom values, and kingdom goals. He is calling upon them to recognize the coming of Christ in the way that they live life, the things they emphasize, and the things that they hold valuable. This passage of Scripture is reminiscent of the words of Jesus telling people that where their treasure is there also is their heart (Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:33-34). It is only a matter of time before the wealth of the rich rots; before their clothes become moth-eaten and their gold and silver rust. Some have objected that gold does not rust. Perhaps it does not rust if it is pure but it is highly probable that the refinement of such metals was not to the same standard as we would see today. Only today I saw an article where a picture was shown of gold rescued from a sunken ship and the gold looked as if it had rusted.

James uses a word for “rust” in verse 3 that can also be translated as corrosion or poison. This negative word leaves no

doubt about the true nature of hoarding wealth, it poisons and corrupts the heart of the one who sets their heart upon such things. This rust, will then stand as a witness against the rich. They have this wealth and like a miser they hoard and squirrel it away for a day that does not come and the wealth does no one at all any good. More than this it rots like good food gone bad and becomes poisonous in nature. The rich have stored up treasure for their retirement and in doing so they have ignored the true source of all that is truly good. They have not been rich toward God and in their ignorance and arrogance that which they have set their confidence in has become a consumer of their flesh. They have expended their effort and their physical energy upon something that provides no payment for the future.³

The indictment continues though to go even further; they have done this in the last days at the very eve of one era and at the point when the new era is about to begin they have been old-fashioned, out of step with the times and with a clear indication that the last days are here they have continued to live life as people have always lived life and in this they have failed. They are


³ Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, Interfaces series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) pp. 227-228.

not people of faith, they are not people who live in the light of the coming of Christ. The challenge set forth at verse 4 is to pay what you should to those doing the work. I wonder what this says about all of our buying of cheap goods from workers in India and in China who labor for less than they deserve and maybe even less than they can survive on? In many ways we live in a supermarket world that is sanitized and compartmentalized. We think meat comes from the grocery store and we fail to see the slaughter and the bloodshed that actually is the source of the meat. Is our source of luxury and wealth built on giving unfair wages to workers in other countries? This is why many choose to buy fair-trade goods that pay a fair wage to those producing the goods rather than buying what is cheapest and persecuting the poor.

James wants his readers, whether they are the rich, or the poor, to know that the cries of those who have been cheated, abused and mistreated have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. This is the Lord Sabaoth, the one who commands the armies of heaven to act. The implication here is that they will face the judgment of God and there will be action. The rich have lived indulgently and in luxury on the earth acting as if nothing is going

to change and as if they are not going to have to give an account. They have fattened their hearts and like an animal prepared for slaughter they have ignored that possibility. While on the one hand for the rich this is a horrendous indictment, for the poor, this is a challenge not to envy the rich and to seek their way as it actually leads to destruction and death. These rich are those who have condemned and murdered the righteous person even though such a person was not even against them.

^{5:7} Therefore be patient, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Behold the one farming expects the precious fruit of the ground being patient upon it until it receives the early and the late rains. ^{5:8} You yourselves also be patient, strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord is near. ^{5:9} Do not complain, brothers, against one another so that you are not judged; behold the judge stands at the door. ^{5:10} An example you received, brothers, of the suffering and the patience of the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ^{5:11} Behold we call blessed those who endured; you heard of the patience of Job and you saw the end purpose of the Lord, that the Lord is sympathetic and merciful.



In situations of oppression, like the ones that James appears to anticipate for his readers, hope is essential if despair and cynicism are not to set in. Without hope life becomes nearly impossible. Often hope without the feeling of progress toward the goal can produce an unhealthy environment as impatience leads to rash actions that actually end up destroying the progress toward a goal. In light of this, James calls for patience on the part of his readers.⁴ He gives an example for his readers to help them to understand their role and position before God. Any good farmer knows that they can do everything just right in preparing the soil and planting the seed, but then he must wait. He must wait for the seed to germinate and make its way through the soil. In dry land farming there is also the waiting for the rains to come and when they come the moisture is there, but without them the seed just remains dormant in the soil.

In verse 8, James uses the word from which we derive our word for “steroids” (στηρίζω) to call upon his readers to “strengthen” their hearts. In the prophetic literature, the “setting of the face” is terminology used to denote steadfastness of

⁴ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), p. 42.

purpose (Amos 9:4; Jeremiah 3:12; 21:10; 24:6; Ezekiel 6:2; 13:17; 14:8) a meaning that is carried over in Luke 9:51. James, however evokes an image idiom from the Old Greek translation of the Old Testament of “strengthening of the heart.” It can mean “to gain physical strength” as for a journey (Judges 19:5; Psalm 103:15), or courage that comes from trust in the Lord (Psalm 111:8), or “firmness of intention” (Sirach 6:37; 22:16; 1 Thessalonians 3:13). It is without a doubt one of the last two meanings that James intends here. He does not want his readers to remain merely passive he calls them to be focused and intentional.⁵

Traditionally the word “patience” has been understood as denoting a passive and submissive attitude. The idea of this being that nothing can be done about the situation that a person finds themselves enduring. James is not referring to this type of patience at all. He is calling for his readers to have a militant patience, one that watches intently for a propitious moment. It is used of those that are engaged in the battle of life, such as when swimmers in the sea swim for the safety of the shore. It is also in

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, in the The Anchor Yale Bible series, vol. 37A (New haven CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 315.

military situations in waiting with endurance through hardship for victory. Here in James, patience means to be “constant,” “to resist,” “to be unbreakable,” to be “immovable.” There is an active meaning to the term as James uses it here. This is heroic suffering. This is a word that is used of the Maccabees and their resistance against the forces of Antiochus. It is used to speak of the courage and the patience of the mother of the heroes and their children (4 Maccabees 1:7-11). In the Book of Revelation the word is used with this same meaning. There John speaks of the bloody persecution of the Christians and the patience and endurance of the victims. In verse 11 James speaks of the patience of Job. There is no sense in which the patience of Job is passive. He fights and struggles, calling for the presence of God until he attends. Job resisted, almost to the point of death, and in the end God vindicated him. This is the type of patience that James calls for his readers to have.⁶

James realized the difficulty that his audience faced and in the face of those difficulties he calls for valiant perseverance. He does not stop here in his instructions though: he challenges his

⁶ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, pp. 43-44.

readers realizing that as they tired under the load of their persecution there would be the tendency for to begin to grumble against one another as children do when they are on a long trip and begin to get tired and grumpy. They are not to tire and begin to blame one another for the things they are beginning to endure. When things are going well it is easy to forget about things that perhaps did not go perfectly, but it is human nature that when things begin to go bad people begin to look for someone to blame; we can all easily become critics. James reminds them that the Judge is at the door, near, and they should be fully cognizant of this fact. He then goes on to remind them that their situation is not unique, they are reminded of the prophets who in the past spoke in God's name and for those that endured there is praise for their endurance. The call is for them to be as heroic as were these heroes of the faith in their day. The final thought of this section is to remind his readers of the fact that the Lord is compassionate and merciful. This thought is intended to bring hope in the face of the persecution that they are facing, or would face.

^{5:12} And above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven, or by the earth, nor any other oath; but let your yes be yes and your no be no, in order that judgment does not fall upon you.

In verse 12 James turns to the issue of swearing oaths, challenging his readers to be trustworthy and to avoid such practices as unnecessary because of their verbal fidelity. The Essenes were noted for not swearing oaths and this was seen as a mark of purity.⁷ This appears to be the nearest thing to a direct quote from Jesus himself that is found in the Book of James (Matthew 5:34-37). Leviticus 19 also looms in the background of what is being advocated here. The problem that likely lies behind the prohibitions of Jesus and likely may also be behind the words of James here is the callousness of the Pharisees in taking oaths. They ranked oaths and some carried more weight while some could sound good to the unformed but actually allowed the person to break that oath without fear of retribution. The same things has happened in America today. At one time a handshake

⁷ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.135 - "Any word of theirs has more force than an oath; swearing they avoid, regarding it as worse than perjury, for they say that one who is not believed without an appeal to God stands condemned already." H. St. J. Thackeray, trans., *Josephus, The Jewish War Books I-II* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 375.


was all that was necessary and now witnesses, notaries, and signatures are necessary. Today, even contracts are broken.⁸

Legalities and financial penalties are often required to get people to keep their word.

^{5:13} Is anyone among you suffering, let him pray; if someone is cheerful, let him sing praises; ^{5:14} If anyone is sick among you, let him call the elders of the church and let them pray upon him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ^{5:15} Indeed the prayer of faith saves the sick one and the Lord raises him; if he has committed a sin, it will be forgiven him. ^{5:16} Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another in order that you might be healed. The prayers of a just man are able to accomplish much. ^{5:17} Elijah was a man with the same nature as us, and he prayed a prayer for it not to rain and it did not rain upon the land for three years and six months. ^{5:18} And again he prayed, and the sky gave rain and the the land produced its fruit.

The main idea of this next verse is that Christians should deal with suffering, sickness, and sin, by intercession with prayer

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008), p. 236.



and intervene for one another. It is sometimes the case that sin will be one of the direct causes of suffering or sickness and sometimes it will not. When it is the direct cause confession becomes crucial and in every instance prayer proves to be powerful.⁹ Prayer, as called for here by James, is anything but passive, it is a powerful revolutionary force calling for the power of the God of creation to step in and continue his restorative work of the new creation at the focal points called to His attention by Christians. Christians are called upon to be different than the world. If they are cheerful (feeling good) they should sing (*ψαλλέτω*). The verb used here originally meant to pluck the

⁹ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 239.

strings of a harp (Herodotus, *Persian War* 1:155¹⁰; Lucian, *The Parasite* 17¹¹) and later under the influence of the Old Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures it takes on the sense of singing in accompaniment of such harp-playing (cf. 1 Samuel 16:16-23 ⲓⲁⲓ ⲡⲥⲁⲗⲗⲱ). In the New Testament there are three occurrences of the verb (ⲡⲥⲁⲗⲗⲱ): Romans 15:9 cites the Old Greek translation of Psalm 17:50; 1 Corinthians 14:15 refers to singing “in the spirit and also with the mind”; and Ephesians 5:19 “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among

¹⁰ “When Cyrus, on his way to Agbatana, received these tidings, he returned to Croesus and said, “Where will all this end, Croesus, thinkest thou? It seemeth that these Lydians will not cease to cause trouble both to themselves and others. I doubt me if it were not best to sell them all for slaves. Methinks what I have now done is as if a man were to ‘kill the father and then spare the child.’ Thou, who wert something more than a father to thy people, I have seized and carried off, and to that people I have entrusted their city. Can I then feel surprise at their rebellion?” Thus did Cyrus open to Croesus his thoughts; whereat the latter, full of alarm lest Cyrus should lay Sardis in ruins, replied as follows: “Oh! my king, thy words are reasonable; but do not, I beseech thee, give full vent to thy anger, nor doom to destruction an ancient city, guiltless alike of the past and of the present trouble. I caused the one, and in my own person now pay the forfeit. Pactyas has caused the other, he to whom thou gavest Sardis in charge; let him bear the punishment. Grant, then, forgiveness to the Lydians, and to make sure of their never rebelling against thee, or alarming thee more, send and forbid them to keep any weapons of war, command them to wear tunics under their cloaks, and to put buskins upon their legs, and make them bring up their sons to cithern-playing, harping, and shop-keeping. So wilt thou soon see them become women instead of men, and there will be no more fear of their revolting from thee.”

¹¹ “Other arts, again, are useless to their professor unless he has his plant; you cannot play the flute if you have not one to play; lyrical music requires a lyre, horsemanship a horse. But of ours one of the excellences and conveniences is that no instrument is required for its exercise.”

yourselves, singing and **making melody** to the Lord in your hearts,”¹²

If anyone is “sick” he should call the elders. The indication here is that this person is prone, very ill, and unable to pray for themselves. Such a person is to call the “elders”, those that represent the church for anointing. This is not the anointing before death; this is an anointing calling for physical healing of this person. It is interesting that the call is not here for the priest or for a solitary person but to those who represent the entire local community of believers. The specific command here is to anoint this person with oil. Some have seen the oil as symbolic in the sense that the anointing of kings in the Old Testament symbolized God’s presence with them. Others see the oil as a medicinal substance, but this view is less likely. The healing that might take place here is solely by the will and power of God. Verse 15 indicates that the prayer of faith will “save” the sick. Some have seen this as a reference to physical healing but the emphasis on “forgiveness” may mean that more than that is in mind here.¹³

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, pp. 329-330.

¹³ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 242-244.

Verse 15 - The promise here of the healing of the sick provides a much needed corrective for the timidity with which we so often pray. We so often pray without the boldness to truly ask God to heal someone and instead we pray a timid pray that lacks the faith that James call for from his readers here. God listens to those who pray in faith, though we need to understand that God chooses how, and when, he heals (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). In this verse James uses the word “save” (σώζω), and while the word may here refer to physical healing it must be noted that every other time that James uses this word it refers to spiritual salvation. We should also be reminded that God is more interested in the spiritual welfare of a person than he is their physical well-being. It is important for us to find a balance in our prayers between never expecting God to heal and requiring him to heal on demand. We should pray with a confident expectation that God will hear and answer our prayers. We also need to remember why we are praying. If it is for our own purposes rather than the purposes of God then in reality we should not even pray such prayers. Our prayers should be devoted to the kingdom of God.¹⁴

¹⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 243-244.

In verse 16 the issue of the confession of sins is taken up by James. He makes it clear that the forgiveness of sins comes in the context of confession. The flow of the argument here makes us wonder if there is not meant to be an understanding that there is a connection between the sin and the illness. This seems to be the case. There is the sense that there is accountability here to the group. Life, for the Christian, is not intended to be lived outside the group and there is the sense that the members of the congregation need each other. They are a community. God intended for prayer to bring the body of Christ together so that when one of the members of the community falls ill, physically, or spiritually, others in that community will intervene redemptively. Confession is not merely a mental activity reserved for our times alone with God, it is a communal activity. God clearly intended confession to be as much a part of community life as prayer.¹⁵

The final clause of verse 17 has often been taken to be a statement regarding effectiveness versus ineffectiveness in prayer, but this is not most likely what is intended here. James is seeking to remind his readers that they ought to pray. The meaning then is

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 245.

that the prayer of a righteous person can accomplish a great deal, if, or once, it is actually prayed.¹⁶ To finish this book with a call to prayer may be quite unexpected, but in reality it is very appropriate. Prayer must surround, infuse, and infiltrate everything else that we do. The Psalms are a testament to the wide diversity of things that should be a part of our prayer life and are there for us to use today as a guide. It is the case that many in Christianity today deny their lives, ministry, and relationships, the power that would come through prayer. Prayer provides an opportunity for heaven and earth to intersect and overlap and surely the more often, and the more intensely that happens the better. This is after all what prayer and the Christian sacraments are all about. Prayer is not a cry into the darkness of the unknown but a call to a God that we know, trust, and we know loves us.¹⁷

James then gives to us a great and powerful example of prayer in the life of Elijah whose prayers affected even the weather itself. Perhaps a timely and important reminder for the people of God living in West Texas today. As is always the case

¹⁶ A. K. M. Adam, *James a Handbook on the Greek Text*, in the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament series (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 103.


¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 41-42.

with James he brings things down to a very practical level that challenges us and gives us hope.

^{5:19} My brothers if anyone among you might be led astray from the truth and anyone turns him back, ^{5:20} let it be known that turning the sinner back from the way of his error saves his soul from death and covers over a great number of sins.

James chooses to touch on one last, very awkward subject before he closes his letter. He deals here with the subject of someone inside the community of faith wandering away from the faith. The word used here for “led astray” (πλανᾶω) comes from the Greek word where we get our English word “planet.” The planets were seen as wandering in an unfixed way across the sky as “wanderers.” In this passage James does not assume that the people have wandered away, but he does allow for the possibility, or even probability that such will happen.¹⁸ James also holds out the possibility, if not the expectation, that such a person will be pursued and even brought back by another. He wants to encourage such actions and to tell his readers that this is a powerful and worthwhile effort. It even saves the sinner’s soul

¹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 247-248.



from death. To see someone wandering off from the faith and to do nothing about it is a heinous dereliction of duty. It may be hard, or even impossible to turn them back but the reward if they do is that their soul is saved. When a person is turned back a bit of heaven arrives on earth, a bit of the future that God has in store for his creation arrives. Surely this is what we as participants in the mission of God are called to as his children. To learn with James what he learned from his older brother is to understand and obey the royal law of love and in so doing to get to know Jesus himself. In doing the things that James calls us to, we are called upon to demonstrate our faith and draw ever nearer to God. We are called to be true disciples of Christ.¹⁹

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 43-44.

Synopsis

The words of James come like a nuclear bomb in this last chapter as he unloads upon the “rich.” His words though addressed toward the rich in reality seem to be more focused at encouraging the poor. Though some have tried to identify the rich under scrutiny here with some particular group James does not give enough specifics here for scholars to be certain that he even means to be that specific. In condemning the rich in this fashion James challenges the poor not to be jealous of what they do not have in physical wealth, but to focus upon something of far more value in their standing before God.

James challenges his readers to be patient and to not grumble against one another recognizing that the coming of the Lord is near. They are called upon to do this without complaining all the while recognizing where they stand in the history of God’s dealing with his creation. They stand at the threshold of an even greater change than what they have already seen and it is here that the patience is essential. The patience called for here though is not for some passive, reticent form of patience but for an aggressive, progressive, endurance that challenges the old order

by living as if such a person is already living in the new era under the full dominion of the rule of God. Job is given as an example of the militant patience that James calls for from his audience.

James, as a part of living in the light of being the people of God are called upon to be truthful and forthright in their speech so as not to face condemnation for their shrewdness.

James clearly recognizes that there either already is, or that there will be suffering among his readers and so he calls upon them to pray and he also recognizes that some will be cheerful and he calls upon them to sing songs of praise. For those who are sick he tells them to call upon the elders as the representatives of the church to be called in order to ask them to pray and anoint the sick in order that the power of God may be brought to bear on what causes them to be ill. In doing this they will be raised up and they may be healed. There seems here to be a connection made between sin and illness that calls for confession on the part of the members of the congregation and for prayer to be offered on behalf of those confessing so that they might be healed by the prayers offered on behalf of one another.

Finally James challenges his readers to pursue those among their number who go astray to bring them back and therefore to save their soul and to cover over a multitude of sins.

Questions

1. Why do you think James shows so much concern in this chapter for the rich?
2. Why is reliance upon wealth such a problem for James?
3. How do you think the poor would view the rich after reading what James has to say about them?
4. What is the threat here given by James regarding the rich?
5. What is patience?
6. Are there different kinds of patience?
7. Why is patience needed by the followers of Christ?
8. Why do you think James connects patience and grumbling?
9. What does the judge of verse 9 have to do with patience?
10. How are patience and endurance related?
11. Why do you think James brings up swearing here?
12. Why would condemnation come upon a person swearing?
13. What do the words of James teach us about our everyday speech here?
14. What is the first thing you do when you have pain?

15. What do you do when you are happy?

16. Why do you think James promises that the prayers of the Elders, given in faith are effective?

17. How are illness and sin connected?

18. How can you tell if someone is wandering from the faith?

19. What should we do if we see someone wandering away from their faith?