

PRACTICING HOLINESS IN A PAGAN HABITAT

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

It is said an overly confident believer once quipped to A.W. Tozer that the Christian faith was making unprecedented inroads into the pagan world, to which Tozer similarly replied, "Winning them to what? To true discipleship or cross-carrying? To self-denial? To separation from the world? To crucifixion of the flesh? To holy living? To a despising of the world's treasures? To hard self-discipline? To love for God? To total committal to Christ? Of course the answer to all these questions is no."

James is often times referenced as a New Testament version of Proverbs. In rapid-fire action, he moves from one subject to the next, unloading an inspired plethora of life principles by which believers may confidently live their lives pleasing to the Lord. Perhaps chapter five may be the greatest example of James' continued flow of life-changing principles. There are at least five principles by which believers live as we await the soon coming of our Lord.

Hence, as we take our final journey through James' letter, note chapter five's outline below:

- I. Christians must Embrace Healthy Stewardship (vv. 1-6)**
- II. Christians must Express Hopeful Anticipation (vv. 7-12)**
- III. Christians must Develop Happy Dispositions (vv. 13-16a)**
- IV. Christians must Express Heartfelt Prayer (vv. 16b-18)**
- V. Christians must Perpetuate Heedful Witnessing (vv. 19-20)**

I. Christians must Embrace Healthy Stewardship (vv. 1-6)

It is no surprise James offers us Divine direction on the way we spend our money since money is such a significant part of our daily lives. Jesus taught about money (Mark 12:41). It is neither a sin to be rich (e.g. Abraham, Gen. 13:2) nor to save and make money. While the Bible does not proclaim money is evil, it explicitly states the "love of money" is the "root" of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:9-10; Heb. 13:5). In short, while believers may and even must possess money, money must never possess us (cp. Prov. 28:20).

Note James' opening statement, "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are **m o t h e a t e n**. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye

have heaped treasure together for the last days" (vv. 1-3). First, James reminds believers of *idle money* (vv. 2-3). James refers to money heaped up and never used, a picture of hoarded wealth. For the congregations to whom James wrote, there were three primary sources of wealth: grain, garments, and gold. Today we define wealth in other terms like cash, stock, CDs, real estate, etc. Now, while the Bible certainly implores believers to be both thrifty and non-wasteful (2 Cor. 12:14; Matt. 6:20), tragedy comes with idle money. In fact, idle money tends to bring unwanted results later on. Recall Jesus' story about the man obsessed with full barns (Luke 12:16-21). He soon died with unfulfilled satisfaction.

Also note James speaks of *illegal money*. He writes, "Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into

Reflection Connection

Take a few minutes to think about your finances. Are you able to say, "my bank account is used to glorify God?"



the ears of the Lord of sabaoth” (v. 4). The focus James makes concerns profit made at the expense of common workers. If workers were not paid immediately in James’ day, they could go without food. We speak of living “pay check to pay check” which, for us means either “week to week” or more likely “two weeks to two weeks.” For them, however, it was literally day by day. James addresses some of the wealthy land owners who were holding the wages back and jeopardizing the well-being of their workers. James sets the record straight!

Finally, James addresses *indulgent money*. Observe his penetrating words, “Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you” (vv. 5-6). Money may not be used for selfish gain. Not that we cannot enjoy things money can buy (cp. 1 Tim. 6:17-18). Rather money cannot be morphed into our pleasurable pursuit, or used for extravagant extremes when substance is missing. In other words, what good is a half-million dollar house without a loving home? You may own a Mercedes Benz, but what if you have nowhere to travel? Being good stewards means being godly servants.

II. Christians must Express Hopeful Anticipation (vv. 7-12)

The Bible is clear that dark days will precede the Lord’s second coming (2 Tim. 3:1). And, as the end approaches, there will exist special pressures facing God’s people. James is addressing an especially persecuted community of believers for which they (nor will we) be able to ignore or escape. Hence, they (and we as well) must face the future with hope, anticipating and expecting God’s active, loving care for us as we face even the stiffest persecution and tests to our faith.

With this in mind, James lists three particular ways Christians express a hopeful anticipation as we await the Lord’s return. *First, anticipating the Lord’s return excites us.* He writes, “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early

and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh” (vv. 7-8). Christ’s return is exciting because it is near; or, as James says, His coming “draweth nigh” (cp. Matt. 24:33). The nearness of His coming produces the dearness of His coming. Though the word is not used in Scripture to describe His coming, the New Testament certainly teaches the *imminent* return of Christ. In other words, Christ could return for His people *at any moment*. No Biblical prophecy yet to be fulfilled hinders the coming of the Lord. In a time when we think not, the Son of Man comes (Luke 12:40).

Second, anticipating the Lord’s return examines us. James cautions believers to “stablish your hearts” (v. 8). The term carries the idea of making one’s heart stable. And, while it is impossible for believers to accomplish this feat on their own, Jesus stands ready to forge us in our faith (1 Pet. 5:10). In addition, we

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Reflection Connection

How often do you think about Christ’s second coming? What emotions do you feel?



hide God's Word in our heart making it difficult to disobey Him (cp. Ps. 119). Indeed a heart filled with God's Word is the remedy for not only rivalry and grudging spirits (v. 9) but also for speaking the truth in love (v. 12).

Third, anticipating the Lord's return encourages us. He writes, "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (vv. 10-11). James gives three illustrations to encourage believers—farmers (vv. 7-8), prophets (v. 10), and Job (v. 11). Farmers needed to trust God's *promises* for a fruitful harvest, prophets received God's *power* to deliver His message, and Job excelled in *patience* waiting for God's deliverance. The lesson is obvious for all believers awaiting Christ's return: *we stand on His promise to come; we serve through His power until He comes; we wait patiently for His coming.*

III. Christians must Develop Happy Dispositions (vv. 13-16a)

A third principle James teaches in the final chapter concerns developing the proper dispositions, *happy* dispositions. James informs us how to deal with every situation in which we find ourselves. He asks, "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church..." (vv. 13-14a). To those who are burdened with problems, James counsels them to be blessed with prayer. One may grumble, whimper, and complain but the only real solution is prayer. No affliction is immune to the praying Christian (cp. Ps. 27:5). Affliction will either drive us from God or draw us to Him. James makes it clear prayer is God's means to maintaining a satisfying relationship with Him during times of trouble and affliction. He speaks of being "merry," a term which denotes a good spirit, a glad spirit. Scripture teaches a merry soul does the heart good (Prov. 17:22). The church should be the most delightful, joyous place on God's earth.

In addition, a happy church is a singing church—"let him sing songs." We should meet together in our churches, making melody in our hearts to the Lord (cp. Eph. 5:19; Ps. 115:17). All circumstances in life, no matter the level of difficulty, should draw us closer to the Lord.

IV. Christians must Express Heartfelt Prayer (vv. 16b-18)

As we noted above, prayer is God's means by which He blesses the believer. For James, it is not just prayer, but *prevailing, heartfelt* prayer. He writes, "And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (vv. 15-16). James catches the spirit of heartfelt prayer in these verses.



First, he gives an explanation of prevailing prayer (v. 16b). Prevailing prayer must have *integrity*—“prayer of a righteous man” (cp. Ps. 130:3). For James, righteousness is not only moral in nature, it is also spiritual in nature (Ps. 66:18; Isa. 59:2). If a person’s prayer prevails with God, the person must be righteous. Righteousness begins with being covered with the righteousness of Christ; that is, a person must be saved. Consequently, believers must live holy lives before the Lord (Ps. 24:3-4; 1 John 3:7). Prevailing prayer also includes *intensity*—“effectual fervent.” Not that prayer must be either long or loud. Prayer with intensity means prayer with energy, prayer in the Spirit (Eph. 3:20; Jude 20). Finally, prevailing prayer also includes *immensity*—“avails much.” The power of prevailing prayer by righteous people cannot be overestimated.

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Second, James gives an illustration of prevailing prayer. He continues, “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit” (vv. 17-18). Though Elijah was a powerful prophet, James describes him as a man “of like passions.” At times we make super-humans out of Biblical characters when, in fact, they were all flesh and blood men and women (cp. Acts 14:15). While James notes Elijah’s weakness, he also notes his earnestness—“he prayed earnestly.” The Greek phrase literally means, “he prayed prayer,” strongly suggesting Elijah’s intensity and earnestness. Elijah seemed to have the key to heaven, praying so that rain came. Again, Elijah’s example encourages prayer because of its *effectiveness*—“he prayed again.” Elijah stormed heaven’s gates and would not stop. Do we?

V. Christians must Perpetuate Heedful Witnessing (vv. 19-20)

The final principle James explores concerns our witness for the Lord, heeding the Lord’s command to tell others about His saving, sustaining grace. James ends his letter, “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (vv. 19-20). James has dealt with practical issues for the Christian throughout his letter. His closing theme concerns the conversion of people. On the one hand, James emphasizes turning sinners to God (cp. Acts 3:19; 15:3), and on the other, he focuses on turning saved people who have wandered away from God back toward Him (Luke 22:32).

The church is a Divine rescue operation, an emergency unit dispatched by heaven to save a lost, sin-soaked world. We have a ministry of reconciliation to accomplish.

Reflection Connection

How often do you share your faith in Christ? Does your church offer opportunities to witness and evangelize?



First, observe our mission to restore saints. James exhorts the church to consider those “among you.” He is talking about Christian brothers and sisters, believers who have gone astray. Some wrongly teach believers cannot stray from God. However, the possibility exists one may not only stray in one’s belief (“err from the truth”), but also in one’s behavior (“error of his way”). It is a sad picture James is painting, a picture of a follower of Jesus wandering away from Him. The church has a responsibility to protect the sheep from the wolves of this world. We must at all costs lead believers back to their first love. Our responsibility demands it. However, we will be blessed when we “convert” a wayward brother or sister.

Second, observe our mission to rescue sinners. The work a believer can do on this planet is to lead a soul to Christ. The misery they are suffering—not to mention the eternal misery they will suffer if they die in their sin—is avoided when Christ reigns supremely in and over their lives. Leading a sinner to Jesus is real ministry, significant ministry by the church. Indeed the church is the only institution Jesus endowed with the mission to preach the Gospel. No other organization has the assignment. We must heed the call to win the world to Christ.

Golden Greek Nugget

James encourages believers to wait patiently, and be stable since “the coming of the Lord draweth nigh” (v. 8). The Greek term translated “draweth” is *engizō*, which means “to bring near,” or “to approach.” The Lord’s coming is near; He stands ready to “approach” us. The real question is, are we ready to approach Him? Only by trusting in Christ may any person await with confidence the coming of the Lord.

Wrap Up

In the final chapter, James offers believers several principles by which to live. For some it may be a surprise he begins with the stewardship principle. However, given the focus of the Bible on the significance of proper stewardship, we should not be surprised at all. Other principles include earnestly anticipating Christ’s return, developing happy attitudes while we wait, and winning as many people as we can to Christ. James gives the believer everything he or she needs to live life pleasing to the Lord.

