

Letter of St. James . . . Catholic Scripture Study

Memorize: *Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects* (James 5:16).

Week 5 – Warning to the Rich (Jas 5:1-6)

I. OVERVIEW

With exceptional severity, James reproaches wealthy landowners who love their possessions more than God.

He reproves their pride, vanity and greed (vv. 2-3 and their pleasure-seeking (v. 5), warning them that the judgment of God is near at hand (vv. 3, 5).

Echoes can be heard in sayings from the Old Testament (Job 13:28; Is 51:8). Jesus' warning not to lay up treasures on earth (Mt 6:19-21) is echoed here as a judgment on the rich.

Read: James 5:1-6

[1] Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

[2] Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.

[3] Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days.

[4] Behold, 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.

[5] You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

[6] You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you.

A. A Call to Repentance (James 5:1-3)

Greed, an inordinate desire for material things, is one of the seven deadly sins. An avaricious (greedy) person offends against justice and charity and becomes insensitive to his neighbors needs, so keen is he on his own self-advancement.

- The opening exhortation – **“weep and howl”** – is a very forceful call to repentance.

Why does James tell the rich to “weep and howl?”

These people have spent their lives laying up earthly treasures, but time has exposed the fleeting value of those things. The wealth they have amassed will not last into the final days.

The riches are moth-eaten and rotting and stand as evidence against them in the Day of Judgment. They have indulged themselves right up to the end, oblivious that the axe is about to fall.

Not only that, the rich have achieved their wealth on the backs of the laborers. The cries of the workers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts and their unjust masters will be judged accordingly.

B. Cheating the Poor

“. . . You have killed the righteous man . . .”

This is graphic figurative language for the oppression of the poor and defenceless. To deprive them of their pay (5:4) is to take away their living (CCC 2446).

Now **“the righteous one”** James speaks of who **“does not resist”** is not only the poor man, it also brings to mind Our Lord Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:14 and 7:52).

Images of the poor and our Lord side-by-side recall Jesus parable in Matthew 25:34-46.

The setting of Jesus' parable is the Day of Judgment, when the righteous inherit the kingdom and the unrighteous are cast into the eternal fire based on whether they fed and clothed and cared for Jesus, as he appeared in the needy on earth.

In James words we are reminded that those who failed to care for the needy are, in a spiritual sense, guilty of the blood of Christ as well.

C. Is Money Evil?

James brings a stinging indictment of the rich in 5:1-6. Notice, however, that he does not criticize them for *having* money but for *loving* it.

They are guilty of *greed*. They have sought money for the sole purpose of feeding their own desires, far above and beyond what they need.

- In the process they have cheated workers of their wages.

By contrast, the man with godly wisdom will accept the riches he has (whether they are tangible or intangible) as blessings from God to be shared with those who have not.

- Much good can be done with riches when they are used to extend God's love and mercy to the needy.

II. PATIENCE IN SUFFERING (JAMES 5:7-12)

A. Overview

In this section, just before he ends his letter, James appeals for patient endurance in the midst of suffering. Encouragement is drawn from the past experience of Job (5:11) and the Prophets

(5:10), the present experience of farmers (5:7), and the future coming of Christ (5:7-9).

Read: James 5:7-12)

[7] Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain.

[8] You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

[9] Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors.

[10] As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

[11] Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

[12] But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation.

B. Until the Coming of the Lord

“Until the coming of the Lord” refers to the return of Christ as Judge (5:9). James may be referring to the Second Coming (Parousia) of Jesus at the end of history (Acts 1:11; 1 Thess 4:16-17).

It is also possible, given his stress on the nearness of judgment (Jas 5:8) along with the image of Jesus “standing at the door” (5:9), alluding to Mt 24:33 and Mk 13:29, that James is referring to the coming judgment of Israel and Jerusalem within the first Christian generation (A.D. 70).

Jesus did not choose to reveal the precise moment of his coming (cf. Mt 24:36); he stressed rather the need to be watchful to make sure it found us ready.

Therefore every Christian should live in the expectation of that event which surely will come, though he knows not when. This is also what the apostle means when he says **“the coming of the lord is at hand”** and **“the Judge is standing at the doors”** for he may come at any moment.

C. The Reason for Patience (Jas 5:7-9)

The word *“therefore”* at the start of this reading indicates that James is beginning to sum up his letter as he approaches the end of it.

Look through all who have read so far, beginning with chapter one.

Question: What common challenges has James brought up so far?

James began his letter by speaking of “various trials” and temptations to sin that test our faith. Things like;

- the lack of wisdom,
- the inclination to sin that fights within us,
- our egos, and
- even poverty and riches make it a struggle to do the right thing.

Thus it is an ongoing challenge to control our tongues, to treat other is fairly, to live patiently under those who oppress us, continue on while others is do us harm, and so on.

D. Establish your hearts (v. 8)

Question: What do you think James means by “establish your hearts?”

Our English word “establish” comes from the Latin which means “stable.” In the context of this verse it means “to make firm or stable; to put on a firm basis.”

There is no room for the restlessness or impatience in the established heart which remains steady under irritations and opposition.

Notice that James uses the active tense, telling his readers to establish your hearts. This is something they will DO, not something that comes without effort.

Therefore, being patient does not mean being passive or not acting at all. Rather, patience is long-suffering when faced with opposition and obstacles. It demonstrates a quiet strength and action based not on one's own abilities or resources but on the unfailing faithfulness of God.

E. Do Not Grumble (v. 9)

Grumbling, like slander, is a form of judging. The children of Israel were frequently chastised for grumbling against God when they lacked the patience to wait for His provision or didn't understand what He was doing.

- Their grumbling was evidence that they had concluded (judged) wrongly that God had forgotten them or was treating them badly.

F. Examples of Patience in Suffering (Jas 5:10-11)

The lives of the prophets are a very good model of patience and endurance in adversity. Some of them in particular (Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah) underwent great suffering on account of their obedience to God.

The steadfastness of Job is a warning against grumbling. James may be thinking of how Job endured even the most crushing misfortunes without cursing God or sinning with his lips.

G. Swearing (Taking an Oath)

James cautions readers against the abuse of swearing, echoing the words of Jesus recorded in Mt 5:33-37. Condemnation results when oaths, which are intended for sacred and public contexts, are sworn in secular and private settings.

Swearing: Taking an oath: that is, calling on God to witness that what you are saying is the truth.

The gravity of this sin is not lessened when the binding force of an oath is thought to be reduced by invoking heaven and earth instead of God's holy name.

H. Sincerity in Speech

To “**let your yes be yes and your no be no**” means saying what you mean and then living by it so others will know you can be taken at your word.

It is a summing up of the virtue of sincerity, a virtue which is very pleasing to God (cf. John 1:47) and essential in human relationships.

The Prayer of Faith (James 5:13-20)

I. REVIEW

In the last session we saw that the firm hope of Christ's return provides another anchor against the storms of life. It gives us the perspective we need to be patient in suffering and to steady our hearts as we wait for the Lord.

Like Job, we can rest in the assurance that God is working out his purpose and that he is merciful.

II. OVERVIEW (JAS 5:13-20)

In these final verses, James focuses on the subject of prayer. He teaches that:

- It is a necessary and effective counter to (sadness) suffering (v 13).
- the prayer of priests, while anointing the sick with oil, is the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick (vs. 14-15);
- Prayer for others helps bring forgiveness of sins (v 16).
- All this is supported by the example of Elijah (vs. 17-18).

In verses 13-20, James presents prayer as the first line of defense in several situations, whether it is in trouble or happiness, sickness or sin.

- The reason, he explains, is that for the righteous person prayer is powerful and effective.

The Council of Trent (1551) interprets this text as a reference to the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which is administered by priests (presbyters) to the aged and seriously ill.

Its purpose is to cleanse them of sin, to strengthen them through the spiritual struggles that come with illness, and, in some cases, to prepare them for death.

- Restoration to health can also result if God wills it (CCC 1510–20)

Read: James 5:13-20

[13] Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise.

[14] Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;

[15] and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

[16] Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.

[17] Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

[18] Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.

[19] My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,

[20] let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

A. Prayer and the Sick (Jas 5:13-14)

Question: In vs. 13-14, James gives wise advice to people in three different situations. What are those situations, and what does he advise?

- If you are suffering (sad) – pray;
- If you are cheerful – sing praise to God;
- If you are sick – call for the elders to pray and anoint with oil.

The first thing to do in any situation is to turn to God, whether in prayer or in praise and whether it means praying alone or calling on others to pray for you.

Whatever situation we find ourselves in we should reach out to God (See Philippians 4:6-7).

[6] Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

[7] And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Bringing our concerns before God, particularly when we bring them before him with thanksgiving, will take away our anxiety and fill us with peace, “keeping” our hearts and minds fixed on Jesus.

B. Elders of the church

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church . . .

The term “elder” (in Greek: *Presbyteros*) originated in the Old Testament and designated the tribal leaders of Israel appointed by Moses.

By the time of the New Testament an “elder” or “presbyter” came to refer to an ordained leader of the church who preached the gospel and administered the sacraments (1Tim 5:17; Tit 1:5; Jas 5:14).

- The English word “priest” is derived from this Greek term.

C. Anointing With Oil

“. . . the prayer of faith will save the sick man.”

Oil was widely used in the ancient world for its curative powers; thus it is an appropriate sign for the sacrament. In this text James envisions something more than a simple healing rite.

Physical healing can be an effect of prayers for the sick. In Mark 6:13, for example, the Twelve anoint many people with oil and they are healed.

But James does not mention physical healing here in verse 15. He says that the sick man will be **saved** and raised up and that his sins will be forgiven.

Saved in this context probably refers to eternal salvation. James uses the verb “save” consistently in this fashion throughout the letter.

In the Gospels “saved” is used both of salvation of the soul and of restoration to health, and frequently in connection with “faith.”

One commentator says that in the present a context, the emphasis is on restoration to health.

D. The Lord Will Raise Him Up

The same verve is used of Jesus' cures in Mark 1:31 (physical healing) and 9:27 (during an exorcism).

Some think that it means that the sick person will share in the resurrection.

E. Physical Illness

Physical illness is a sign and consequence of the greater, more urgent spiritual illness caused by sin, and forgiveness is the more urgent temporal need.

Also, suffering has taken on in a new meaning in Christ. No longer is it simply an evil to be done away with. It can also become a means of uniting us with Christ in his suffering that redeemed the world.

- United with his, our suffering too can be redemptive.

F. Confession and intercession (James 5: 16–18)

“Therefore confess your sins to one another. . .”

Based on James' point that “the prayer of faith will save the sick man” and his sins will be forgiven, he goes on to say that we should therefore confess our sins to one another and pray for one another, so that we might be healed (both of sin and of the trial's brought about by illness, if not of the illness itself).

This command must be interpreted within the context of the anointing rite, where the Elders (i.e., priests) presumably hear the confession of the sick person before his sins are remitted through the sacrament.

G. The Prayer of a Righteous Man

James stresses that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful, and he mentions Elijah as an example of such a man.

Elijah remained the faithful to Yahweh when most of Israel went astray. He caused a three and a half year drought by his petitions to God.

The point is that God hears and answers the prayers of a humble and upright heart, but refuses to listen to the petitions of an evil and divided heart.

H. The Conversion of Sinners

Question: How do the closing verses of this final chapter sum up James' primary message about the importance of living out one's faith in good works?

From the beginning of James' epistle, he has emphasized the need to put our faith into practice.

Not only does that express and complete our faith, but also by doing so we have the opportunity and the responsibility to cooperate in God's saving plan.

It is fitting that he brings his letter to a close with the assurance that bringing a backsliding brother or sister back to the truth **“will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”**

If we truly have a living faith in God, his love will flow from us not just to help those in material need but also to reconcile those who have left the Father.

- This cooperation in **Jesus' primary mission** of saving souls is the ultimate outworking and evidence of His life within.

III. SACRAMENTS AND HEALING

In James 5:14-15 “will save,” “will raise him up,” and “will be forgiven” are the three key verbs that indicate the effect of the anointing.

1. The first (“will save”), in the original Greek, is a verb that can mean either healing of the soul/spirit (eternal salvation) or healing in the sense of restoration to physical health. But in the context of sickness, death or their danger it always, in the New Testament usage, refers to physical healing.
2. The second verb, (“raise him up”), clearly refers to healing (restoration to health) and is a verb often used in Mark to refer to the healings worked by Jesus.
3. “Will be forgiven” is the third effect and refers to sin. This effect is conditional (**“if he has committed any sins”**) and the Greek word here used for sins implies *grave* sins.

The intended effect of the anointing seems to be the healing of the man's sickness, the healing of the whole man, including his sins if need be.

The direct intention is healing of the sickness, with forgiveness of sins as a conditional effect. How then did this come to be reversed so that healing came to be regarded as a conditional, secondary effect?

It's a long story but the fact is a startling transformation has come about in the sacrament. With the renewal of the liturgy, the sacrament's purpose is now once again declared to be healing.

The new sacramental form of Anointing emphasizes healing of the whole man rather than stressing forgiveness of sins as it used to.

The End
