

XXIV. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion and Best Practices”
James 5:13-20
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
June 15, 2014 – Morning Sermon

We are now in the concluding section in our study of the book of James. This is the Word of God. God’s Word is true. James 5:13-20 says [13] *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. [14] Is anyone 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 one who is sick, 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 person has great power as it is working. [17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, 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 heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

[19] My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, [20] let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

Let me remind you of the theme of our series and that’s how to live in a sin-cursed world with a Gospel life so that our mind is renewed with Gospel wisdom and our heart is fortified so that even the midst of the trials of life we may affirm what we know, add to what we need to know and undo any strongholds of idolatry that are left in our lives and that’s how God is working in our lives in a Genesis 3 world. This will be one sermon in two parts. James comes to a conclusion and the best way to tell you what he is doing here is to share a personal experience.

When I was a new believer God led me to three men who had a significant impact in my life. One was my grandfather and it would have been my dad but at that time he was not walking with the Lord but later did, praise the Lord. I would go down to Augusta, Georgia regularly just to sit in my grandfather’s office to ask him questions. Then there was Harold Jones who was one of the elders in the church. Another person was my pastor at the time and I absorbed as much as I could from his preaching and then at times we would be accessible for my questions.

What was I doing with these men? I was a new Christian and needed a couple of things. One is I needed to know sound doctrine, God’s Word and those three men were very much used of God to teach me Gospel wisdom for life. Secondly, I needed to know how to respond to the issues of life. So I would constantly be asking “If this happens, what should I do?” In other words, I was asking them for best practices as a new Christian. What am I to do as I witness to others at work? I used to work for United Parcel Service while I was putting my wife, Cindy through college and as I would bear witness to other truck drivers it was a different experience. So I wanted to know how to

respond to situations. I was grappling with whether God was calling me to the ministry and I wanted to know how to walk through these things.

So I would ask these men about best practices then but as a new/novice pastor I would do the same thing except my needs were even greater so instead of just three men I had seven 'go-to' men. I secured the availability of Frank Barker Jr., Bill Hay, Jim Baird, Henry Krabbendam, Jim Boyce, R.C. Sproul, and Al Martin. I wouldn't overdo it but I wanted them to help me understand faithful, pastoral commitment to sound theology and then as a pastor, what do I do. The very first marriage I officiated I had a threat on my life and those were questions I asked these men. There were all kinds of questions that I had early on in my ministry and those seven men I could go and talk to.

James is doing something very similar here. James has laid out for us consistently that we're in a sin-cursed world with the trials of life but God is sovereign and He is using those to perfect and equip you so you can joyfully mature in Christ and steadfastly minister for Christ even in the adversity of the trials of life. He has given you two instruments to help you – prayer and the Word. Then James went through a series of showing us external sins that are possible in the lives of God's people and the church but they should not be acceptable. So how do you deal with the external sins? Every time he went to the heart and the sins are there because of some issue of the heart. Then he went to Gospel wisdom so that the mind is renewed and the heart is equipped to kill the sin and to pursue Christ. He dealt with issue after issue after issue with this.

Now James gets to his conclusion and as a good pastor he is going to give us best practices. How do I develop a Gospel wisdom consistent life of best practices? He goes to four issues and he introduces these issues with three rhetorical questions and one statement. The first rhetorical question is, is anyone among you suffering? Suffering is a general word. It's used of Jesus, Paul and Jesus tells us that we will encounter it in our life. The second rhetorical question is, is anyone among you cheerful? The third rhetorical question is, is anyone among you sick? I like what Sinclair Ferguson said about this text for he said 'James is asking you whether you're suffering, sunny or sick?' In each case James gives you best practices consistent with Gospel wisdom. Then James concludes by giving this one inevitable situation; what we do if someone wanders from the faith. In the church of Jesus Christ people are going to wander. Using Gospel wisdom what do we do when people wander from the faith?

In this study we'll cover two of the four issues in this passage which is found in James 5:13 and then I'll cover the remaining two issues in the concluding study of the book of James next time. Before I get to the first two issues I have some initial observations I want to give you as I set up all four of them. The first thing is as you get to the conclusion of this letter you get a model of good, pastoral leadership. Good pastoral leadership is honest. James doesn't sell us this stupid thing we have out now called the prosperity gospel – name it and claim it, confess it possess it, believe it and receive it, blab it and grab it. He says 'no, you're in a sin sick world.' Christians will have trials, suffer and get sick and there will be seasons of cheerfulness as well. So he is extremely honest.

The second thing he does as a good pastor is he models for us discipleship. Pastors pull the trigger on discipleship. As a new believer one of the men that had a great impact on my life was Harold Jones, as I mentioned earlier. He was an elder at Faith Presbyterian Church. Elders, it is an extraordinary responsibility we have to oversee the

church that it be faithful to its policies and its commitments. It's also an extraordinary responsibility to shepherd the flock as we try to do in our congregational communities. Other than that I don't know anything more important than for an elder to grab two to four younger people and start to disciple them. You have no idea how much that is going to multiply your life. Ladies, some of you mature in the faith, you need to do the same thing. The pastor pulls the trigger on discipleship, models discipleship and in fact does discipleship but it's really important to see it as it moves down into those congregational communities, down to the 70, down to the 12, down to the 3.

So James as the pastor, pulls the trigger on discipleship, sets a pattern for discipleship and shows honesty in life, gives the theological answers to life and you don't work from experience but theology. Now here are the sins in your life but don't just go for therapy on sins but go to your heart. Your heart with a renewed mind can kill the sin and you begin to grow in grace. Then he knows things are going to happen so he is going to help us with best practices to help you get started in life.

These four issues of suffering, cheerfulness, sickness and wandering are encompassing in life but they're not exhaustive in life. In other words, there are a lot of other things he could have talked about but these are four that every believer will experience. Every believer at times in their life is going to suffer. Suffering is not an interruption in life for it is life. There will also be seasons of cheerfulness and times of sickness and there will be a sickness unto death, a sickness to take us home to the glory of God. There will also be times of doubting and wandering in the church of Jesus Christ as people begin to wander from the faith. So it's not exhaustive but encompassing of things that are common and that need to be addressed with Gospel wisdom.

Thirdly, these best practices are not final practices. Best practices are starting points. They are not finishing points. Best practices are needed to get started in a way that you want to finish. They are needed in our life, why? These best practices are not natural responses. In suffering our natural response is not to pray. In cheerfulness our natural response is not worship. In sickness our natural response is not to call for the elders of the church or for other believers to pray. When people begin to wander our natural response is not to seek them out but to avoid them. We need to learn and hear best practices because they are not our natural responses so that we have a Christian first response.

Aren't you glad when someone has a medical accident and the first responders know what to do initially and are there? What they are doing initially will set up what needs to be done later and not work against it. So you want your first aide in Gospel wisdom to set up the final aide, the continuing practice. So what is our first aide, our first response, not our final aide or our final response so that it is consistent with the Gospel treatment that will come later? That's how I believe we approach this matter. So let's just start with the first question.

The first question is anyone among you suffering? Perhaps the first thing we might ask is out of these four why is this one the first one? We believe in the inspiration of Scripture and that every Word is God-given and the order of words. Suffering is first because it is the way of life. Jesus said that you will suffer. You will suffer because it's a broken world. They persecuted Me and they will persecute you and if they persecuted Me how much more will they persecute you. You are in a world of adversity, failure, challenge, and possible discouragement. This is a very general term that he uses here

with suffering and it is not a season of life but it is life. Jesus warned and promised us this. The more you hold to the Gospel the more likely it is to occur in your life. Notice James is speaking to believers when he says 'is anyone **among you...**' Christians do suffer but God is sovereign over the suffering.

He uses the suffering in the lives of individual Christians and when the church is suffering. Earlier we prayed for the church in Iraq and what they are going through right now is absolutely unbelievable. Their hope is that it is not some mutation of accidental, geo-political situations but their God is sovereignly using that. There may come a time in the near future where we will be facing such adversity. Will we compromise our mission, ministry or message or will we be ready in that day? When that day comes in our personal lives and in the life of the church what is to be our first response? Our first response is to pray. That's our directive. Prayer is not the final response or the only response.

Now if that's the question and that's the directive then here is a takeaway on this. The takeaway is three words – least? Best! First! I have tried to word this carefully. Sometimes we give away our real faith with our words. Somebody comes into our life with a problem and many times what do we say to them? We generally say 'the least I can do is pray.' That is not the least you can do but it's the best you can do. It may not be the only thing you should do but it is the best thing you can do and the first thing you should do, but not the only thing you ought to do. Prayer is not the least we do but the first you can do and the best that you do. It is God's instrument with His Word to His people to lead us to everything else that we ought to do. Instead of going by our intuition we go to prayer and the Word and then we go by Divine direction and empowerment in the life of those who are suffering and in our own lives.

This is not our natural response for when suffering comes our natural response is self-pity. It is not prayer but despair or discouragement or maybe anger at God or situations. What is to be our first response? It is that we go to prayer to our Savior to guide and direct us. Is James saying anything new? No, he is circling back around. James said in James 1:2-4 says [2] *Count it all joy, my brothers, **when** you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* What if I don't know? James 1:5 says [5] *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God (pray), who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*

So here is the suffering that I am supposed to respond to with joy, not in the suffering but in a sovereign God who is using it, and I need Gospel wisdom to respond rightly. To get the Gospel wisdom to respond rightly I am to pray and go to the Word so that I have the mirror of God's Word with me. All James is doing is setting the nail deeper from where he started off with us. He is giving us this best practice of how we need to deal with the suffering that comes into our life. In suffering, if we respond naturally, we will move away from God in discouragement and or anger but in prayer we begin to move toward God. We draw near to God and He draws near to us and we begin to understand that prayer changes things and me because God changes things and me. God changes things through praying people and God changes praying people. He changes how we deal with things and how we respond to things. That is best practice number one.

Let's go to the second question. Is anyone among you cheerful? It is not unusual after suffering which is life and Paul says that it is granted not only to believe in Him but to suffer for His sake, that there are seasons of blessings in God's providence. It is not unusual that in the midst of suffering comes a season, a respite in God's providence of blessing in our life. What do you do then? You sing praises. You worship. It's not the natural response. The natural response is to be drawn to trust in the blessing. That's why Moses tells the people "God is going to take you into the land and give you a land you didn't deserve. He will drive out enemies that are greater than you. He will give you cities you didn't build and orchards you didn't plant. He will give you a harvest you didn't sow. In that day do not forget the Lord." It is the milk and the honey we are drawn to in that day instead of the Lord. What does worship do? It calibrates us and keeps us focused where we need to be.

The Bible tells me that not all things are good but God works all things together for good. I know that God has good plans. I know that God is good even in a sin-cursed world God is working in the life of me, His child. I know those things are going to come in my life. I know that God is working something glorious. The tendency, constantly, of the old man in the days of blessing is to focus on the blessing and we begin to adore them. It is fine to admire them but we don't adore them. God grants you a season of blessing as a husband and wife with children and jobs but the constant tendency is we move from the admiration of God's good blessing to the adoration of the blessing. We fasten our hearts on the blessing instead of the Lord. That's what the natural response is.

In the Amazon Rain Forest there is a bunch of monkeys but I can't pronounce their names. The natives love these monkeys. They capture them for two reasons – to eat and to sell. These are very smart indigenous people. They know what a mature monkey looks like and they are the ones they want. They also know the size of the monkey's hands when it's mature. Now why is this important that they know the size of the monkey and the size of its hand? They also know these monkeys love watermelon. So here is what the native does. They set out watermelons with holes that are cut just the size, and no bigger, of the monkey's hand. They know the monkey will find the hole, stick his hand in it and grab as much of the watermelon as they can. After the monkey has a handful of that watermelon they can't get their hands out of the watermelon and it has them. They don't have it. They love it so much they won't let go of it. They are then easily captured.

That is how you and I do it. God gives us a husband or a wife, a season of blessing, children, relationships, jobs, neighborhoods, a home and our natural response is to grab it and hold it. We no longer adore and admire God who gave it but we will adore the blessing. What is the antidote or best practice for this? Whenever a blessing comes, turn immediately to worship. That is why God made you. He made you for His glory. That's why God saved you. He saved you for His glory. That's why God's providence gives you the breath you have right now to praise His Name.

When God's people gather once a week to praise Him with songs and hymns of praise, from whom all blessings flow and speak to one another of the praise of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, if I can't do it there then I won't do it by myself. I won't speak to myself if I can't speak to others and to the Lord of His praise. The praise of God is theology into melody and harmony. God says 'When I bless you what I have called you to do is to sing praises to My Name.' Why is that important?

For this takeaway again, let me give you three words – Purpose! Witness! Prevention! Worship is the work of the Gospel. Why does the Gospel save you? It is that you might worship Him. Praise the Father, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm talking about Trinitarian praise. This blessing I have I did not deserve it. This blessing that I have is a taste of glory of the blessings to come. This blessing that I have has been sent by my Savior who is interceding for me. This blessing that I have is a purchase from Christ on the cross that has been given to me. I don't deserve it and I wouldn't have even fashioned it the way that it is fashioned but God purchased it through His Son, gave it to me by His Spirit in the affairs of life even in a broken world. So what should I do? I should praise God from whom all blessings flow. Adore Him who has reached into my life in order to minister to me that I might know Him, learn of Him and grow in Him.

Why is this so important? Here are four reasons why. Number one is this lines us up with God's purpose in our life. Why did God make me, save me and sustain me? It was for His worship. So when blessings come and I praise Him, that lines me up with God's purpose in my life. Secondly, when I praise Him it is a witness to others that my life is fully dependent and reliant upon the Lord and Christ is my life, not the blessings. Thirdly, it is instructive to me not to worship the blessings but the Lord. Fourthly, it is inspirational. When God blesses me and I praise Him now I'm ready to go back into the battle. How did Israel go into battle? The front ranks are the choir. When I'm singing praise to God now I'm ready to go back into a Genesis 3, sin-cursed world and ready to serve the Lord with the strength of the praise of His Name for the Lord inhabits the praise of His people.

Here is your final takeaway for this study. The presence of Gospel wisdom in the life of Christians and the Church will be marked by an intentional culture of God-centered prayer and praise. It is God-centered, Trinitarian prayer. We pray to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. We have God-intentional, God-centered worship and praise. We praise the Father. The Father seeks true worshippers. We worship through the Son and we worship in the Spirit.

I am really saying this to myself. Satan has no qualms when I come up with my ingenious plans on how to advance the Kingdom of God. He doesn't tremble at my personal resolve but I can promise you that whenever the Gospel is proclaimed and Christ is exalted and God's people go to their knees and raise their voices in praise, Satan not only trembles but he flees. That's why we don't do our natural response of self-pity in suffering, of self-absorption in the blessings, but the best practices is prayer to the Father, through the Son in the Spirit in the days of affliction. The best practices are worship and praise to God in the days of blessing. It is an intentional, Gospel-focused, wise, Holy Spirit-empowered, Christ-centered life of a believer and a church in those days. It is not our natural responses but it is learned, intentional and embraced new habits of a new heart. We don't want our natural responses that lead to self-pity, discouragement, anger or the self-absorption that leads to the idolatry of the blessings that God has given to us.

It is first responses and best practices that lead to Gospel practices in life. We are intentionally embracing them and building them into the culture of my personal life, into the culture of the life of the church that we would be a church marked by prayer that seeks God and praise that is pleasing to God. This is absolutely foundational. It is not all that we do for best practices are only starting points but if you want to know where we

end up with the other practices of our life, then you will end up from where you started. God-centered beginning in prayer and praise leads to God-shaped, God-centered, God-absorbed lives for His glory. That's what leads us.

That's why when Paul and Silas were thrown into a prison they did not go into self-pity. They called upon the Lord. As God began to work in their hearts Silas and Paul began to sing praises. There at Philippi they are cast into a dungeon jail and when they arrive there they pray and praise. The Bible says that the prisoners listened. Then God delivered them from that affliction. The jail crumbles down under an earthquake. What did the prisoners do then? What do you think prisoners would do if an earthquake knocked down prisons around here? You in our prison ministries know what they would do, don't you? There would be a quick scattering yet where Paul and Silas were, none of them left. They didn't leave because they were captivated by God-centered responses to affliction and blessing. Not only did the prisoners get captivated but so did a Philippian jailer and that's why a household baptism follows right after.

People who embrace the Gospel wisdom that in the afflictions of life, call upon our sovereign God and His sustaining grace and in the blessings of life we praise God from whom all blessings flow. We intentionally say 'no' to our self-centered, self-pity, self-absorbing, natural response and ask God for the supernatural grace of God that in the days of adversity we call upon Him and in the days of blessing we lift His praise from our lips. Let them sing praises! Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. I am grateful to You for the grace and mercy that is found in Jesus Christ. You may be reading this today and you don't know this Savior. I want to tell you that you're in a sin-cursed world and the momentary experiences that God lets you kindly enjoy will not sustain your life. They will be empty. You will never have enough money or a big enough house or a big enough vacation or enough acclaim or things to put on the wall that will make life meaningful but there is a Savior who loves you, who has defeated our sin and in this sin-cursed world will save you, sustain you, grow you and take you to glory. All you need to do is turn from self and sin and put your trust in Him who died on the cross for you. Father, for Your people, give us hearts that embrace Gospel wisdom. In the days of affliction teach us to pray. In the days of blessing may we declare Your praise with our lips. Praise God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit from who all blessings flow, in Jesus' Name, Amen.