

Swearing, Suffering, Sickness, and Sinning

Confession time: James 5:12-20 is the part of the epistle that gives me the most trouble. The rest of the book seems pretty straightforward, and in some ways, so does this section- they just don't seem to be connected. For instance everything seems to flow and fit together nicely through 5:11.

1. Jewish Christians *scattered abroad* need to mature past the *first fruits* of initial obedience to Christ (1:18) to the *second fruits* of having "*the word implanted*," 1:18,21. *Trials* would test their faith and help bring them to this productive maturity, 1:2-17, but they would have to become *doers of the word* rather than just *deluded hearers*, 1:22-27.
2. The *maturation* to *second fruits* would be necessary to correct the *partiality* they showed, particularly in their association together for worship, which had sprung from their *evil motives*, and would prevent *mercy* from being both *shown* and *received*, 2:1-13, because their *faith* was *useless* and *dead* separated as it was from the proper *works* having never matured to *second fruits* of the having the *word implanted*, 2:14-26.
3. So, until such maturity (of *second fruits*) could be attained, they should refrain from wanting to or becoming *teachers*, and instead work toward *bridling the tongue* (and the *whole body* as well), 3:1-12, and the attainment of *the wisdom from above* rather than the *earthly, natural, and demonic* which was producing *jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and evil* in their lives, 3:13-18.
4. This lack of spiritual growth and development (to *second fruits* of the *word being implanted*) led to *worldliness* (wrong *pleasure sources, evil desires, and friendship* with the *world* rather than *God*), 4:1-4, separation from the *grace* of God, 4:5-6, *speaking against* and *judging* one another, 4:11-12, improper views of *life* and the *sovereignty of God*, 4:13-15, and *sinful rebellion*, 4:17, and the *condemnation* and *killing* of the *righteous man* through *greed* and *materialism*, 5:1-6. But there was (and is!) a solution to this dreadful condition- a way to get *back on track* to *second fruit* maturation, 4:7-10!
5. As for the *righteous man*, those who have already matured to the *second fruits* of having the *word implanted in their hearts* so that it controlled and dictated what they thought, felt, and did, what about them? They were the very ones being mistreated and abused by those who were supposed to be their brethren! They needed to *patient*- like the *farmer*, and *not complain* nor allow their suffering to lead them astray from the *mercy* and *compassion* of the Lord, 5:7-11.

But contextually, then James seems to throw in somewhat random admonitions in the last nine verses about *swearing, suffering, sickness, and sins*. But these subjects are not random at all, and they're not just thrown in either! Let's look closer...

V.12, Swearing.

Why would James preface this verse with "*But above all, my brethren...*"? Surely this is not the most important message the Lord's brother had to deliver! Is it? Understand a little bit of history on this subject from Jesus in Matt.23:16-22. Now see that this is **exactly** what James has been attempting to accomplish in this letter! Having your *deeds* match your *words* by being *doers* of the word rather just *deluded hearers*, 1:22-27. Not having *evil motives* and *judgments* toward *poor brethren* that need concealing with *false vows*, 2:1-13, but having a *faith* which sees the need of a *brother or sister without clothing and in need of daily food* and meets that need, 2:14-26.

Furthermore, keeping the command of 5:12 would require the *bridling of the tongue*, would it not, cf. 3:1-12, and demonstrate *true wisdom from above* rather than the *earthly* and *demonic* kind that through *selfish ambition* and *bitter jealous* would cause one to "*be arrogant and lie against the truth*," cf. 3:14ff! The sorts of *swearing* and *oaths* they were being admonished to

avoid were likely the very kind they were using to conceal their *worldly* desires and actions, 4:1-4, and their resultant *condemnation* and *killing of the righteous*, 5:1-6. Indeed that had become “*judges with evil motives*,” cf. 2:4; 4:11.

V.13, Suffering or Cheerful.

In the epistle thus far, where is *suffering* mentioned, and what is its source? Hasn't the writer just described the *suffering of the righteous man* in vv.1-6, and prescribed *patience* to him in vv.7-11? Is it any wonder here that he is further told to *pray*, vv.10,13?

Likewise, who in the context of the letter would be *cheerful*? Two possibilities coming to mind: 1) those who have been *exalted by the Lord* through their *humble repentance* in *submission to God* and *renewed fellowship with Him*, cf. 4:7-10; or, 2) those who *patiently entrust their souls* to God while *suffering unjustly* after the pattern of the Lord, cf. 5:7-11 and 1Pet.2:18-23 (see also Acts 5:41). In either case, these would be those who had *graduated to second fruits* of having *the word implanted*, 1:21!

Vv.14-15, Sick.

The word translated as *sick* is *astheneo*, and means to be *weak, feeble; to be without strength, powerless* (Enhanced Strong's Lexicon). But is this *weakness* of the *physical* or *spiritual* variety? Think about the context of the epistle thus far. Has *physical* or *spiritual sickness* been under consideration? Obviously, the *spiritual sickness* of having a *faith without works* that is *useless* and *dead* as a result of failing to mature to *second fruits* of having *the word implanted* has been the theme! So why would James now switch to discuss what to do when in cases of *physical* illness when he has spent five chapters talking about *spiritual sickness*, and is now summarizing and closing his letter? In my judgment, he didn't. He is still talking about *spiritual sickness*! Note 1Cor.11:30 in this connection. In further support of this conclusion, please consider:

- If *physical illness* is under consideration, it would have to be a physical illness that resulted from *spiritual sickness* because of the verses that follow.
- *Call for the elders* because the *spiritual well-being* and *protection* of the flock is their purpose, v.14b. Are elders responsible for the *physical health* of the sheep?
- *A prayer offered in faith will restore him*, v.15a. This is *always* true regarding *spiritual sickness*, but is not always true with regard to *physical illness*! If this regards *physical sickness*, why didn't it work regarding Timothy, 1Tim.5:23?
- *The Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins* (again, *spiritual sickness* or *physical illness* that results from *sin*), ***they will be forgiven him***, v.15b. A couple things need to be realized here: (a) the word *sick* is not the same as in v.14- here it is *kamno*, and means *to grow weary*; (b) it is not a *sin* to be *spiritually weak*, as in v.14, but that *weakness* can lead to a *spiritual weariness* (*kamno*) which causes one to *lose heart*, Heb.12:3; (c) therefore, if *spiritual weakness* (which is not a sin) has led to *spiritual weariness/loss of heart* (which is a sin), then “*if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.*”

Vv.16-18, Efficacy of Prayer.

“*Therefore*” is *there for* a reason- the previous thoughts are being linked to a conclusion that follows. The conclusion is this: the *spiritually sick* need to *confess their sins*, and the *spiritually well* (in this case, *the elders*) need to *pray for them* that they may be *healed* (*iaomai*-to be *made whole; to free from errors or sins* or to *bring about one's salvation*).

The power and efficacy of prayer is then illustrated through the example of Elijah, who prayed for the *physical* to effect *spiritual repentance*, cf. vv.17-18; 1Kings 18.

Vv.19-20, Covering Sins.

Now, with the above understanding of *spiritual* rather than *physical sickness*, these verses fit perfectly with both the immediate context as well as the theme of the letter! The *effective prayer* and efforts of *the righteous*, coupled with the *submissive repentance* of the *errering* (cp.v.19, turns him back with 4:7-10), **will save *his soul*** (not his *physical body*) **from death**, and thus **cover a multitude** (of his) **sins!**

Conclusions:

- **Please don't think of this letter as a collection of various and disjointed admonitions!**
- **James is about the same thing from beginning to end: Dispersed Jewish Christians who have not developed the *second fruits* of having the *word implanted* and are thus stuck in the *first fruits* of *initial faith* and *obedience*.**
- **As a result, they have become *partial*, their *faith* is (in its current state) *useless* and *dead*, their *tongues* and their lives are *unbridled*, and their *wisdom* is still *worldly*. They have made themselves the *enemies of God* through their *worldly desires* and *actions*, and *repentance* and *humble submission* to God is required to correct their *views* and *practices of life*.**
- **But they are not alone. We can, and unfortunately are, guilty of the same things in the same ways and for the same reasons! Our prescriptions are the same also, 4:7-11 and 5:16! Now, will you do what you know to be *the right thing*, 4:17?**