

James 5:12-20 - Spiritual Integrity

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 April 2015

Preacher: Guest: J. Medlock

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

It's our great privilege to have with us to open God's Word for us this morning, John Medlock. Some of you know John. John used to live in Huntsville. He was an attorney here, and he sat in the pews you're sitting in right now, many a Sunday, for several years.

And worshipped here as a part of this congregation. He and his wife, Laura Beth, were here for, I think, five years. Is that right, John? John then felt a call into vocational ministry, which took him from Huntsville to St. Louis for seminary, and on now to where he is in California, pastoring a church in San Luis Obispo, a beautiful, beautiful place.

And he's back here this morning. It's a real treat for us to have him back in Huntsville. So, John, we're looking forward to having you open God's Word for us this morning. Thank you. Thank you, Will.

As Will told you, I live in California, but I arrived there by way a long time ago of Huntsville and Southwood. And this feels a lot like coming home.

[1 : 18] My family were members here before we had any kids. Mike Honeycutt, who many of you know and remember, his very first baptism in this church as pastor was my oldest son.

And that was 15 years ago, just for a little perspective. And in a lot of ways, my journey to seminary and eventually into formal church ministry starts here.

When I tell my story, it often starts here. And I'm grateful to be here and would ask you all if you would join me in reading and hearing God's Word this morning from the book of James.

This is the very last few verses of James' letter. I'm going to read James 5, verses 12 to 20. You can feel free to join in along with me with the Word of the Lord this morning.

James says this. But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

[2 : 34] Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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.

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. 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. 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.

Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.

This is the word of the Lord for us this morning. Will you all pray with me, and let's ask God to open our hearts so that we can learn and grow from it. And Heavenly Father, we ask you this morning to give us your spirit to illuminate and open our hearts so that we can see the glorious riches of your grace that are stored up for us in this portion of your gospel.

[4 : 01] God, clear away our distractions and the barriers that we build up to hearing the truth about ourself and about you. God, clear away our hearts to honest confession and restore our confidence in the finished work of Jesus as the basis of our life together.

We pray these things in the strong name of Jesus. Amen. Will mentioned earlier that before I went to seminary, I practiced law, and one of the things that I learned when giving a persuasive speech

or trying to convince somebody to adopt your point of view is that the beginning and the end of what you say is probably the most important because that's what people remember, right?

That's just common sense, really. All that stuff in the middle may be good, but what you start with and what you leave them with is often what sticks in people's mind.

And that's apt for today because these verses that I read to you are the very end of James' letter out to this church. And to be honest, you wonder if James failed the rhetoric class because these verses don't feel like a neat and tidy summing up of this book.

If you've read the book in the past or are familiar with what's in it, you may agree with me, this feels a little scattershot. It's almost like he's saying, okay, I'm almost done, so I'm going to give you some bullet points. Do this and remember that, but don't do that.

[5 : 34] And don't forget this and okay, I'm done. That's a little bit the way it reads to me. But as I've read these verses, and I'm convinced that they are a unit that go together in Scripture, I think there is a thread holding them together.

And that thread is the issue of integrity. Now, integrity means a couple of things. It means honesty, right?

Truthfulness. James certainly has that in view. But I know a number of you are engineers, and you're concerned about integrity in a different way, and that is the way things hold together.

Something's integrated. It's not fragmented, right? It's unified. And James has that in view as well. But he starts with the issue of honesty.

Verse 12, he says, Above all, my brothers, do not swear. Right? Let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. Now, James is not talking here about bad language. I think that's clear.

[6 : 42] He's also not talking about a prohibition on taking a lawful oath or making a promise. He understands that promises are part of life. This is certainly not any rule against swearing in court or taking an oath of office to serve as a police officer in the military.

Or even you saw it up here this morning. Down here, when Will introduced the new members, what did he ask them to do? To take vows, right? To make promises. So even part of our worship services are, in a sense, the making of promises, the swearing of oaths before God and before one another.

This is not what he's talking about. Now, what James is talking about when he says do not swear is don't live your life in such a way that you have to make a special promise just so people will believe you.

A seminary professor of mine said that the meaning of this verse dawned on him one day when he was leaving for work in the morning and he told one of his little girls, Sweetie, tonight when I get home, we'll go for ice cream.

And she said, Daddy, do you promise? And he said he remembered at that moment all the other times that he had told her that when he got home from work, he would take her for ice cream and something came up.

[8 : 17] And she had learned by the way he lived his life that she needed to extract a special promise for him just so she could trust him.

And he said that's what that verse means. Don't do that. Don't live your life like that. That's a problem.

What James is encouraging the body of Christ to in this verse is relational trust, sincerity, honesty, following through with what you say, keeping your word.

In other words, the first kind of honesty, and that is honesty of speech. But there's more in verses 13 to 16, which I'm going to just skim really quickly here.

He shifts from honesty of speech to honesty of life. What I think I would describe as an honest response to the varied experiences of life.

[9 : 17] So, he says, if you're suffering, what do you do? You pray. If you're cheerful, give praise. If you've sinned, confess.

If someone sins against you, pray for them. Forgive them. Bring them back into the fold. If someone's sick, don't keep it to yourself.

Go to the church. Call the elders. Have them pray for you and anoint you with oil. Now, it's probably worth pausing at this point. This is an unusual practice to many of us.

It sounds odd to our ears. But it was perfectly normal to them because of the significance that oil had. First and foremost, oil in the ancient Near East was considered medicinal.

So, think, for instance, if you're familiar with Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. And the poor fellow gets attacked by robbers on the road and beaten and injured and left for dead. And the Good Samaritan who finally finds him to treat him does what?

[10:21] Pours oil in his wounds. So, there's the medicinal purpose. But oil also carried a spiritual significance, a sort of symbolic spiritual significance in the early church and in the Old Testament as well.

And that is, it was a symbol of God's spirit at work. So, when a new priest was consecrated and ordained or when a new king took office, there was an anointing with oil.

And this was a picture that God's spirit was coming down and working. And so, to come to the elders of the church, the ruling, overseeing shepherds of the church and ask for prayer and anointing with oil when you're sick is an admission that you need all of the spiritual and physical resources that can be brought to bear on your situation.

It's an acknowledgement that God is the Lord of all of life. The physical, the spiritual, the emotional, the social. If you were here early in the service, you saw that the meditation that prepared us for worship this morning was from the Heidelberg Catechism.

The first question and answer, what is your only comfort in life and in death? And the answer to that great catechism question is what? That I am not my own, but I belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, right?

[11:46] But this is, the anointing with oil is the church is acting out of that, that we belong to Jesus, body and soul. In other words, we are not the agents of our own healing.

So, I think you see what I'm talking about. Integrity, honesty is James' first point. Honesty of words, honesty of responses to the varied circumstances of life.

Now, this is easy to say and hard to do. I had coffee with a friend a few weeks ago. Back in California, and we were sitting and talking, and we turned to some things he'd been struggling with, and he told me how he's been really wrestling with anxiety and wakes up some mornings unsure how he's even going to get through the day.

How does he hold it all together? The pressures of work and family and finances and the stresses of marriage and the uncertainties of raising kids, and this was really troubling to him.

And so, we talked for a while, and we prayed together, and then I told him that I get it, that I feel the same way sometimes. And we were able to enter into that discussion.

[13:13] And when we ended, we kind of lamented that so often the church isn't a place where we can be honest about these things, that it's often difficult in the church to own these sorts of realities about ourselves, to bring them into the light.

I heard Will earlier encouraging you all in that direction, and I believe that this is a place where you probably can do that pretty well, but I think you all still recognize the difficulty, right, the pressure to look like you've got it all together.

Which raises the question, why? Why is it like that? Why can't we admit and walk together through the real difficulties of life? Why?

I mean, it's interesting to me that James says, hey, if you're cheerful, give praise. Sometimes it's hard to admit you're really joyful. In a strange way, that's an acknowledgement of need as well, right?

If you're super happy about something, that means you needed something and you weren't sure how you were going to get it, and it happened. Why is it so hard? Well, I think the answer is that our fragile hearts crave acceptance and the approval of other people.

[14:40] And we live so often in fear that if we are truly known, we will be rejected. And so we wear masks, and we make ourselves look better, and we hide our flaws, and we inflate our assets and our achievements, and we bury our struggles and our sins deep underground so that they never see the light of day.

And we will be so hard. Because if you knew what was really in there, if you knew the places that my mind went, if you knew the hidden motives that drive so much of my activities, what would you think of me?

You couldn't love me. You couldn't accept me. Okay? So we play act. We posture for approval. And there's an incentive to dishonesty, right? To dishonest words and dishonest living. And by the way, this is not a religious insight. This is a common humanity insight.

Right? Everyone everywhere behaves this way, and everyone knows that everyone is doing it. The music critic, Carl Wilson, makes what I think is this very, very incisive point.

[16:04] Carl Wilson says, even our cultural tastes, like music or movies or art or cultural products or even the food we like, our tastes are so often not just our preferences.

It's not merely the things we like and dislike, but our tastes and our preferences are bids for status. So, for instance, I can freely admit that I love the new Sufjan Stevens album, but I could never admit that I also like the new Taylor Swift CD.

Because, why? Because those things say something about me. There's associations with both of those, right?

Those are signifiers of something that I want myself to be. They're the masks that we wear.

Or, to get at the issue from another way, when you think about our tendency to posture and bid for approval, take yourself back in your mind's eye. If you're old enough, take yourself back in your mind's eye and seat yourself in the middle of a middle school lunchroom.

[17:24] Or, remember when you were the new person on a team or at a job.

Or, envision yourself as, oh, I don't know, for instance, a visiting preacher returning to a church where he spent a lot of time and really wants to be accepted.

Put yourself in any of those situations and feel the craving for approval and acceptance and welcome descend on you like a fog.

And watch the way we posture and play act. Or, envision yourself in a church at a time of transition. I get it. I've been through it from a number of standpoints, actually. I understand how it feels to wonder about the future and to want your church to be seen as attractive and alluring so that in God's good time the new man who's going to be your pastor will come and he'll like you and he'll want to be here.

[18:45] What James says is this. Church, Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead to secure God's never-ending one-way love for us.

And when we build our life on him, instead of the lesser loves that this world has to offer, he says we are fully justified.

And that means not merely forgiven, but esteemed. God, dearly beloved of the Father, when he sees you and me, his children, through faith in Jesus, the Bible teaches us he doesn't just tolerate us or, as C.S. Lewis reminds us, doesn't just pity us, but he rejoices over us.

He bursts into song. And that means we don't have to hide. And we don't have to fear.

And we don't have to wear a mask. But we can be honest. We don't have to make ourselves look better or live up to the unwritten rules of a judgmental culture. Or we don't have to perform for acceptance or earn love or work for dignity.

[20:13] But in Christ, all of these are ours. Free of charge. Gifts of unmerited grace and mercy.

Do me a favor. Look around at one another. Just... What do you see? What do you think of the people that you worship with every Sunday morning?

What do you think they think of you? We look pretty good. We have good jobs, most of us.

We're well-dressed. We have, by the world's standards, not only plenty of money, but an excess of money. I see stable families and moral, upright people.

And even our rough spots, which we'll admit, we have our rough spots, but even those are under control, right? Friends, the reality is all of us are here because we are broken and we cannot fix ourselves.

[21:24] We're sick and we cannot cure ourselves. We're enslaved to something and we cannot free ourselves. And those are just ways of saying that we're sinners who cannot save ourselves.

And what James is telling the church is that the gospel, what Jesus has done on our behalf, the good news that God has entered this broken world and set about on a mission to set things to rights and is catching us up in that.

That good news frees us right here and right now to speak and live honestly. That's what James wants.

He wants the honesty that's both truth-telling but that transcends that and gets to the place of truth-living. And that's the first point that he makes. The second is this. The second type of integrity that he urges the church to is the integrity of community, unity, holding things together.

This is implied very strongly in verses 13 and 14 and 15. Prayer and praise and calling on the elders of the church are things that are not done alone. They are done in community.

[22 : 38] In the context of a church, a gathered body of people. In verse 16, he gets explicit. Therefore, he says, confess your sins. To who?

Into the air? Quietly in your closet? No, to one another. Do it, confess your sins to one another. Pray for one another. This is one instance among many in the New Testament of those one another's. The apostles who wrote the Bible just never intended this to be a solitary activity. This is community. Verses 19 to 20, he says this. He kind of amps it up a notch.

If someone wanders away from trusting God, he says, that's more than just his or her problem. That's our problem. And we bear a responsibility to do the hard and risky thing of entering into their life and drawing them back to faithfulness and trust in God.

This is a vision of community and accountability and mutual responsibility that completely inverts the narrative of individuality and individual freedom and the pursuit of personal rights that our late modern American culture socializes us into every day of our lives.

[24 : 00] The poet, novelist Wendell Berry says this. There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. There is only responsible or irresponsible dependency.

Do you hear that? There's no such thing as autonomy. Only responsible or irresponsible dependency. What James is encouraging the church towards, what he encourages us towards today, is an act of responsible dependency.

And he gives us, in these verses, the practices that will, in a sense, disciple us into such a community. And so it's worth looping back around and pausing for just a minute to consider what he tells us to do.

He says, confess your sins to one another. I think there's two ways that can happen.

One is generally. Confess your sins generally. That's why, ordinarily, I know if you've worshipped here before, you know that in the order of service, we almost always have a confession of sin.

[25 : 09] Right? Where Will and the other pastors and worship leaders will lead you all in a verbalization of your sin. Right? You know what they're doing? They're putting words in your mouth.

They're making you speak out loud ways that you or someone in this group may have sinned against God or against your neighbor this week. Right? That's why we do that.

To make it part of the public conversation. And that's intended to provide a language or a grammar of confession to teach us from the Bible and the trusted creeds of the church how it's supposed to sound when we bring the reality of our sin into the conversation.

So confess your sin. Confess your sin generally. Right? Make it a part of the things that you talk about. Admit your struggles. Admit your sinful tendencies.

Learn your idols, those things that you are tempted to substitute for God as the source of meaning and joy in your life. Talk about your struggles.

[26 : 20] Let your guard down. Give people permission to know you. So let's confess your sins generally. But I'm more and more convinced that in most churches that believe the gospel, that is pretty reasonably done.

People are fairly willing to admit, I'm a sinner. The next thing you've got to do is confess your sins specifically. Oh, I'm a sinner. Yeah, how? Oh, well, I break God's law.

Well, specifically which one? What have you done? What have you done? Who have you done it to? What harm have you caused? Who have you damaged? That's a little harder to do.

It's one thing to say I am such a sinner. It's another thing to say last night in the middle of an argument, I said some words to my wife that were hurtful and that stole her dignity and that were dehumanizing.

And I'm not sure she's forgiven me yet. And I'm not sure I blame her. Confess your sins specifically.

[27 : 34] Admit to others how you have hurt them. Acknowledge the cost and the damage that you have done. Listen to understand. Without defensiveness and without minimizing what you have done or explaining it away or blame shifting.

Oh, well, I know that I did that, but you should have seen what she did. No, it's a confession there. That's the first practice of an integrated community.

The second one is this. Prayer. Pray for one another, he says. Now, this assumes a couple of things. This assumes the honesty of speech that we talked about earlier.

I can't pray for you unless I know what's really going on. I can't lament with you, grieve with you, pray for your struggles, or celebrate with you unless I know what's going on in your life.

So pray for one another, he says. Pray for the church. Pray for its welfare. Pray for our growth in faith and trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 44] Pray for the vulnerability and safety that we need to move into the kind of community he's describing. Prayer matters. Prayer works. That's the point of the digression.

About Elijah? Elijah? What does he say? Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours, and he prayed, and God did amazing things. Now, the point here is not that, oh, if we pray enough, God would do some sort of a nature miracle.

That's not the point at all. The point is, this is a regular guy. This is not a spiritual superhero. He was a man, a person just like us.

He was fearful and anxious, and yes, he was a prophet of God. He had a calling to fulfill, but he was a regular guy just like us, and he prayed, and God did these things through him.

God heard him. The point here is that prayer matters. It's an integral part of the life of the church. It's another practice of an integrated community.

[29 : 53] Finally, in verses 19 to 20, the issue of mutual accountability. If anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, that is a redemptive thing.

If we see someone going down a harmful road, James says it's not only our right, but it's our responsibility to walk along with them and gently, lovingly bring them back.

Now, I think that we can only do this if we've done the first two previously. We can only enter into someone's life and have any kind of credibility at all to bring them back to faithfulness unless we are people of honesty, who confess our sins, and who pray.

Think of it. Think of it. You know, there's a tendency to be hands-off, right?

Again, we're fairly laissez-faire. Keep your nose out of my business. Don't judge me. Someone might say, you don't have the right to do that. But if we are known and formed by confession and prayer, if we're characterized by the honesty and humility and spiritual sensitivity that these kinds of things cultivate, then we can love others enough to exercise this kind of mutual accountability without being harsh and judgmental and scolding and condemning.

[31 : 35] And also without the sort of hands-off, libertarian, that's none of my business attitude. So, confession, prayer, mutual accountability.

These are the characteristics of a community that believes deeply in the finished work of Jesus, and they are the practices that form us into a community that deeply cherishes the finished work of Jesus.

Earlier I mentioned the tendency we have to wear masks. Soren Kierkegaard, the philosopher, compares life to a costume ball, a masquerade party, where everyone wears a mask with the purpose of concealing their identities.

And they spend the evening hidden away, eating, drinking, dancing, hiding who they really are.

Now, this looks like community, right? There's a bunch of people in the room doing a bunch of stuff together. But he says, really, they're just freelancing. Everybody's out for their own interests, because nobody's revealed and nobody's known.

[33 : 12] Kierkegaard says, this is a warning. Because eventually, if we live this way, we will become unable to sustain real relationships. He says this, I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others by wearing a mask that their true nature could not reveal itself.

But he goes on and says this, He who cannot reveal himself cannot love. And he who cannot love is the most happy, is the most unhappy man of all. And that is the irony of wearing a mask.

The thing that is meant to create an illusion of happiness destroys happiness, because it cuts off the possibility of love. And the thing that looks like community erodes community, because nobody can really relate.

What James is urging us to do as he finishes his letter, is take off the mask and live honestly, so that we can become the community that God wants us to be.

That is my hope and prayer for the church at large. We routinely think about this and talk about this and pray for it in my church in California.

[34 : 39] And it is my prayer for you, especially when you're in this weird and uncertain time of transition. I'm going to leave you with a couple of questions and then be done.

What mask do you wear? Both what are you hiding and what are you using to hide it? What would it look like to take it off?

What would it cost? What would it gain? Let's pray together and ask God to help us learn how to do this.

Join me, please. Almighty God, we confess to you that it is so easy for us to live our lives inauthentically and dishonestly, pretending things are great when they're not, acting as though things are under control when we really know that they are not. relying on the externals of life, whether it's money or success or achievement or our reputation or the behavior of our children or our status in life, whatever it is, relying on something to make us look good, when in reality, we desperately need a Savior.

[36 : 07] Lord, help us to trust in your work so much that we have the courage and the humility to take off the mask, to live honestly, to speak honestly, and to push into community with prayer and confession and the hard work of mutual accountability.

God, these can only be done because Jesus is Lord. Lord, but we celebrate and praise that he is. And thank you for that. And pray these things in his name.

Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.