James Study
Session #7

James 5:7-20

James closes his letter with some final comments. We might summarize these comments as “The 4 P’s.” What are the 4 P’s? ***Patience, purity, prayer, and pursuit.***

Patience (James 5:7-11)

The first P James addresses is ***patience***. However, he doesn’t talk about patience in general. Rather, he talks about patience in the context of the Lord’s return.

***7****Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord’s return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen.****8****You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.*

James 5:7-8 (NLT)

James reminds us that the Lord Jesus is coming. We don’t know when he’ll come. (Jesus himself reminds us that *“No one knows the day or the hour.”*) Nevertheless, he will come. In the meantime, we need to be patient.

In telling us to be patient, James gives the farmer as an example. The farmer doesn’t worry about the harvest because the farmer knows there is a period in between planting and harvesting. Therefore, the farmer is content with waiting for the crops to ripen. In a similar sense, we should content with waiting for the return of Christ. But are we?

For example, how many Christian leaders over the years have tried to predict the return of Christ? How many of us have heard that, due to the recent hardships we’ve endured, we must be living in “the last days” (even though every generation has had to face challenges)? Actually, the New Testament witness makes clear that last days began with the first arrival of Christ.

*14Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, “Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. 15These people are not drunk, as some of you are assuming. Nine o’clock in the morning is much too early for that. 16No, what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel:
17‘In the* ***LAST DAYS****,’ God says,
    ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
    Your young men will see visions,
    and your old men will dream dreams*Acts 2:14-17 (NLT, emphasis added)*.*

*Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. 2And now in these* ***FINAL DAYS****, he has spoken to us through his Son.*
Hebrews 1:1-2a (NLT, emphasis added)

*18Dear children, the* ***LAST HOUR*** *is here. You have heard that the Antichrist is coming, and already many such antichrists have appeared. From this we know that the* ***LAST HOUR*** *has come.*
1 John 2:18 (NLT, emphasis added)

The last days began when Jesus came to our planet and will be finished when he returns. Until then, we are not to try to predict his return, but rather, faithfully live as if Jesus were coming back this moment.

Jesus told several parables regarding this point.

*35 “Be dressed for service and keep your lamps burning, 36 as though you were waiting for your master to return from the wedding feast. Then you will be ready to open the door and let him in the moment he arrives and knocks. 37The servants who are ready and waiting for his return will be rewarded. I tell you the truth, he himself will seat them, put on an apron, and serve them as they sit and eat! 38 He may come in the middle of the night or just before dawn. But whenever he comes, he will reward the servants who are ready.*

*39 “Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would not permit his house to be broken into. 40You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected.”*
Luke 12:35-40 (NLT)

In the early church, there was an expectation that Jesus would return quickly (within one or two generations at most). Therefore, when this expectation wasn’t met and Jesus didn’t return within that timeframe, there was a great deal of confusion. Paul addresses this confusion in 1 Thessalonians (probably Paul’s first letter) where he discusses what happens to Christians who have died before the Lord’s return.

*13And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. 14For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died.
15We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. 17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. 18 So encourage each other with these words.*
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NLT)

James’ readers, like Paul’s, wanted Jesus to return quickly. Further, when he didn’t return quickly, they were discouraged. Why? Because they were suffering hardships and were hoping God would do something about the evil in the world. James assures these readers that God ***will*** do something.

He also writes that the Lord’s imminent return should affect how we live.

***9****Don’t grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!*

James 5:9 (NLT)

The Lord’s return will come with judgement. Therefore, it matters how we treat people. If we criticize and complain about each other, we are opening ourselves to God’s judgement. God will judge us for such immature behavior that does nothing but demean others and drive a wedge in the church.

 ***10****For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*
James 5:9-10 (NLT)

The Old Testament prophets were messengers whom God called to give a particular message to the people. While we tend to romanticize the prophets, their job was anything but easy. They spoke difficult truths to those whose hearts were hardened against God.

After his victory at Mt. Carmel, where he defeated the false prophets of Baal, Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel (Kin Ahab’s wife) and became suicidal.

***3****Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. He went to Beersheba, a town in Judah, and he left his servant there.****4****Then he went on alone into the wilderness, traveling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors who have already died.”*

1 Kings 19:3-4 (NLT)

Jesus observed how tough the prophets had it when he spoke these words to the religious leaders.

***47****What sorrow awaits you! For you build monuments for the prophets your own ancestors killed long ago.*

Luke 11:47 (NLT)

In addition to the prophets, James cites Job as another example of patience.

***11****We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy.*
James 5:11 (NLT)

Job literally lost everything (livestock, children, health, etc.) due to a wager between the accuser (Satan) and the Lord. While the Lord never took anything away from Job, the Lord did allow the accuser to come after Job, which caused a great deal of distress. Even so, Job held onto his faith in God. As such, he was a man of patient endurance. In the end, God rewarded his endurance by restoring what he had lost.

***12****So the Lord blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning.*
Job 42:12*a* (NLT)

Purity (James 5:12)

Having discussed patience, the second P James lifts up is purity of heart.

***12****But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned.*
James 5:12 (NLT)

James’ exhortation is similar to the one Jesus gives.

***33****“You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.’****34****But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne.****35****And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King.****36****Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black.****37****Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.*

Matthew 5:33-37 (NLT)

At first glance, James’ words about oath-taking seem out of place. Indeed, they appear disconnected from his earlier discussion on patience (James 5:7-11) and his ensuing discussion on prayer (James 5:13-18). Still, we can feel the urgency of his words.

James opens with the comment *“But most of all.”* In other words, the half-brother of Jesus is encouraging us to pay attention. He desperately wants us to hear what he has to say.

The bottom line is, ***we as Christians are to mean what we say and say what we mean***. If we say we are going to do something, then we need to do it – end of discussion. Otherwise, we are only lying and being deceitful. Integrity and maintaining a pure heart are crucial for anyone who wants to follow Jesus.

Prayer (James 5:13-18)

The third of the 4 P’s James highlights is ***prayer***.

***13****Are any of you suffering hardships? You* ***should*** *pray. Are any of you happy? You* ***should*** *sing praises.****14****Are any of you sick? You* ***should*** *call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.*

James 5:13-14 (NLT emphasis)

James doesn’t consider any of the above activities to be ***niceties*** but ***necessities***. Indeed, he tells us we “should” do them. Should means we must.

In mentioning these activities, James is deepening the line of distinction between Christians (who follow Christ) and those who follow the world.

When those who follow the world are happy, what do they do? They self-indulge. However, we as Christians should sing praises, attributing our happiness to God.

When those follow the world are suffering hardships, they cry, get depressed, and/or complain. However, we as Christians should pray and ask God to intervene and bring healing.

When those who follow the world get sick, they may hope their situation gets better. They may even seek medical treatment. However, in addition to (not in lieu of) seeking medical treatment, we as Christians should ask for church leaders to pray over us. ***Again, the point is we as Christians are to be different from those who follow the world.***

James wants us to grasp the ***power*** behind prayer.

***15****Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.*

***16****Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.*

James 5:15-16 (NLT)

James addresses two types of prayers: prayers for healing and prayers of confession.

***Healing***:

James assures us that God does answer prayers for healing. That said, as Christians, we’ve come to understand that sometimes that healing doesn’t always happen in the manner that we would like. (All of us have been in a situation where that’s been the case.) However, God still answers those prayers. Further, God’s healing comes through a variety of channels (medicine, vaccines, counseling, miraculous intervention, etc.). God doesn’t ignore us when we ask for healing.

***Confession***:

God desires that we would not just be physically well but spiritually well. Therefore, James highlights the importance of confession. Should we confess our sins to God, God will forgive us.

***9****But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*

1 John 1:9 (NLT)

In addition to ***confessing our sins to God***, James encourages us to ***confess our sins to others*.**

Indeed, confessing our sins to others can be a powerful way of experiencing healing. The reason is it brings our sins out of the darkness (where they’re given power) into the light of God’s redemptive grace. It also creates accountability for the future.

We as Protestants would do well to recover the value of confessing our sins to each other. During my monthly check-in call with my clergy covenant group, we often ask the question, *“What unconfessed sin are you struggling with right now?”* From there, the members of the group and I confess our sins out loud to each other. How much stronger our churches would be if we adopted this practice!

James closes verse 16 by highlighting the power behind the prayers of an earnest, righteous person. Then he gives Elijah as an example.

***17****Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years!****18****Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.*

James 5:17-18 (NLT)

James could have given a number of examples here. However, his choice of Elijah makes sense. After all, James’ audience included Jewish Christians who would have quickly recognized Elijah as the main prophet of Israel. (As we may recall, Elijah and Moses appeared at the Transfiguration, thereby demonstrating that Jesus fulfilled both the Law and the Prophets.) James’ argument is just as God answered the prayers of Elijah, an ordinary man, God will answer our prayers, too. ***Prayer changes things.***

In *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (1997)*,* Pastor Jim Cymbala writes about how in the 1970s he was serving a church in Brooklyn, New York City. It was a hurting church. There were about thirty people in attendance. The leadership team wondered week-to-week if they were going to have enough money to keep the lights on. The services were so boring and uninspiring that there were even times when Cymbala didn’t want to be there. He was discouraged. He ended up catching a cold. At the encouragement of his doctor, took a short trip to Florida to spend some time in the warmer climate.

While he was there, he sat on a tour boat and cried out to God. *“Lord, I have no idea what I am doing…All I know is my wife and I are working in the middle of New York City, with people dying on every side, overdosing from heroin, consumed by materialism, and all the rest. If the gospel is so powerful…”* He couldn’t finish the sentence. Tears choked him. Suddenly he felt God whisper to him, *“Jim, if you and your wife will lead my people to pray and call upon my name, you will never lack of something fresh to preach. I will supply all the money that’s needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response.”*

When he got back to New York, Cymbala shared this vision with the leaders of Brooklyn Tabernacle. In response, they started a Tuesday evening prayer service. Jim said: *“From this day on, the prayer meeting will be the barometer of our church. What happens on Tuesday night will be the gauge by which we will judge success or failure because that will be the measure by which God blesses us.”* The prayer service became the engine that drove that Brooklyn Tabernacle. Today they have an average attendance of six thousand persons of all different races and nationalities. Their choir is known around the world. More importantly, the church offers God’s saving love to everyone, particularly those on the margins. It all started with Cymbala’s decision to help Brooklyn Tabernacle become a praying church.

Question for reflection: ***How am I growing in my prayer life?***

Pursuit (James 5:19-20)

The last P James give us is pursuit. More specifically, he talks about pursuing somebody who has wandered away from the faith.

***19****My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back,****20****you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.*

James 5:19-20 (NLT)

James seems to challenge a doctrine to which Christians in the Reformed tradition hold. The proper name for this doctrine (from the Synod of Dort) is the “perseverance of the saints.” But another way of putting it is “once saved always saved.” Those who promote this teaching believe that genuine Christians can ***never*** lose their salvation. ***However, James doesn’t appear to subscribe to this teaching (nor do United Methodists).***[[1]](#footnote-1)

James seems to say that it is possible for someone who has had a genuine conversion experience to turn away from his or her faith.[[2]](#footnote-2) This happens all the time for a variety of reasons. Some (though certainly not all) of these reasons include:

1. The challenges of life.
	1. Life gets difficult, and we think God has forgotten about us.
2. Doubt with which we struggle sours and goes bad.
3. God didn’t answer a prayer or fulfill an expectation.
4. Sin seemed more appealing.

When we pursue such wanderers, James writes, we will save them from death and bring about their forgiveness.

Further, by pursuing wanderers, we are embodying the very ministry of Jesus who, out of love, has pursued all of us.

 ***1*** *Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.****2****This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!****3****So Jesus told them this story:****4****“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?****5****And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders.****6****When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’****7****In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!****8****“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it?****9****And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’****10****In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”*
Luke 15:1-8 (NLT)

Question for reflection: ***Who am I pursuing (or whom have I pursued) who has wandered away from the faith? Or who has pursued me when I wandered away?***

1. For further study, check out: https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-do-united-methodists-believe-once-saved-always-saved-or-can-we-lose-our-salvation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also: Hebrews 3:12, 10:35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)