

Today we come to the end of reading the letter of James found in the New Testament. That may bring joy to some here that we are finishing. For several weeks we have been reading through this letter and allowing it to speak to us and the challenges and opportunities that we face in our world today.

This letter originally written by the brother of Jesus begins with an invitation to see trials and temptations as a test of faith. James challenges his readers to not merely be listeners of the Word but also doers of the Word. James speaks out against showing favoritism and he has some very harsh words for those who gain wealth by underpaying their employees.

James says to be cautious in the words that we use because our words can get us in trouble. James also emphasizes to live in the present and not to be preoccupied with what is going to happen tomorrow.

Earlier we listened to the song, "Time Marches On" by Tracy Lawrence. Someone sent this song to me as a song that was important to them. As I listened to the lyrics, I thought that they sum up what real life is like for many of us. Real life that this upcoming reading can speak to.

The words which we will be reading today can be misinterpreted in a way that can be very harmful as we will see.

### **Read James 5:13-20 (Letarshia)**

These words from James can be interpreted in a very harmful way. We are going to watch a video of how one interpretation of these words can lead one into very poor theology that leads someone away from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

This video is lengthy, but it shows one woman's struggle with what she was taught about Jesus and the church and what she thinks about all of that now.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-nE-zrIhKc>

When you started watching this video you may have expected it to end in a way that Christians sitting in the pews on Sunday morning would want it to end. We may have expected it to end with the woman and her husband discovering what Christianity really is at its core.

You may have expected an ending which was neat and tidy where everyone ends up singing Christian music joyfully in some type of church service. But that is not how this story ends. In this video the woman moves from being very active and committed to her faith and the church to the end where she is happy to have left it all.

Unfortunately, her story is an all too common story. An all too common story where someone goes from being very active in the church to being totally disconnected. So, what is our response to all of this?

If we return to the passage from James, we get basic instructions of what we in the church should be doing in the world and in our community and in our church. What should we be about?

James says that if any among you are suffering then we should be in prayer for ourselves and for the one who is suffering. James sees this as basic to our Christian faith. That we should be in prayer for those who are suffering.

So, when we gather in worship, we lift up prayers for those who are suffering. And we will be doing that today. We will lift up prayers for those who are grieving. We will lift up prayers for those with illness. We will lift up prayers for those who are losing their homes due to fires and foreclosures.

We will lift up prayers for those who feel lost and alone and seeking direction from God. It's important that we are gathering together to lift up prayers for those who suffer who do not have a connection to this church. We lift up prayers for those who suffer in our community, in our nation, and in our world.

James says that if any are cheerful and happy then we should sing songs of praise. When we gather as a community of faith are we happy to be gathering in worship? Are people allowed to share their moments of joy and thanksgiving?

Do we celebrate with one another when we experience good news? According to James, we should be singing songs of praise whenever we feel joy and happiness in our lives and recognize the goodness of the Creator.

James says that if any among us are sick then we should call the church leaders together to pray over the one who is sick and lay hands on them if possible. Are we lifting up in prayer those who are sick and ill mentally and physically? Do we believe in the power of prayer to bring healing and restoration? James says that praying for healing should be one of the principle acts that we are engaged in doing.

What James says next, however, can be troubling. James seems to say that the faithfulness and fidelity of the one praying will impact how prayers are answered. James says that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” James seems to imply that prayer is a transaction. If you pray correctly then God will do something good for you.

But we saw in the opening video the dangers of this theology. The woman in the video saw her life as a model of Christian faithfulness and she did all the right actions and God blessed them and prospered them. But then she found herself in Poland and in the Nazi concentration camps.

She saw the worst of humanity which caused her to question her idealized world. That life and humanity and our relationship to God is not so clear cut. There's more to life than doing what is right to earn God's rewards.

I would say that where this woman is at the end of the video is exactly the place where the church needs to be. To be reaching out with the gospel to people who have doubts and questions. To be attempting to connect with people who have left the church because they found the organized church to be lacking and dysfunctional.

So, we will keep doing what James guides us to do. We will lift up in prayer those who are suffering. We will celebrate with those who are happy. We will provide support and encouragement to those who are suffering from physical and mental illness. And we will keep doing this over and over and over again.

We will not do these things to earn our salvation. God has already granted us salvation through the life and death of Jesus Christ. We do these acts of prayer because as we do them, we grow closer to God and to one another.

May God give us the wisdom to be the ones who pray and lift up all who are suffering and to celebrate with all those who feel joy. AMEN.

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-Given: November 11, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)