

## **2.16.20 Confess Your sins to One Another, & Pray for One Another James 5:9-18** **Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Today's passage from James has three "One Another's" and I'll be touching on all of them. Listen to James 5:9-18,

**"9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another**, so that you may not be **judged. See, the Judge** is standing at the doors! **10 As an example of suffering and patience**, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. **11 Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance**. You have heard of the **endurance** of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. **12 Above all, my beloved, 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.**

**13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray.** Are any cheerful? They should **sing songs** of praise. **14 Are any among you sick?** They should call for the elders of the church and have them **pray over them**, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. **15 The prayer of faith** will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. **16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another**, so that you may be healed. **The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** **17 Elijah** was a human being like us, 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 the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest."**

If someone followed you around for a week, what percentage of your communication in speech, texts, emails, or social media posts would be classified as "*grumbling?*" I confess I found myself doing some grumbling earlier this past week because I was frustrated by a couple minor things and then I sat down and looked at this scripture to work on my sermon and I laughed. I sat in silence for a while, took some deep breaths, and let things go and put them in perspective so that I could move forward. Often the first person convicted by the scripture for the sermon is the preacher!

James is talking about relationships in this passage and when relationships are stressed or in difficulty, there can be a need for challenging conversations. But there's a

difference between talking *with someone* about an issue or concern with the desire and intent of resolving it and *grumbling to other people* about someone else while taking no steps to talk to the person directly involved. This can harm the other person's reputation without doing what's necessary to try and repair the relationship, clarify expectations, or resolve issues. James says we shouldn't grumble against one another because when we do, we open ourselves to the judgment of God.

James follows what he says about **grumbling and judgment** by advising us to remember what we learn from the prophets and Job about the need for **patience, suffering, and endurance** when we're in difficult seasons. Don't trust any preacher or leader who tells you if you just listen to them or do what they say that life will be easy and prosperous. Whatever they're selling, it isn't Biblical Christianity. We know from the lives of the prophets, the life of Christ, and of the Apostles, that patience, suffering, and endurance are part of faithful living.

In verse 9, James describes an aspect of speech, **grumbling**, that's often motivated by frustration or difficulty, then reminds us of the need for patience and endurance in the face of suffering or hardship, and then returns to another statement about speech in verse 12 where James says not to make or swear oaths in an attempt to justify what we're saying, "*I swear it's true, believe me!*" Our speaking and communicating is to be truthful, honest, and clear (verse 12), "*so that you may not fall under condemnation.*" James is restating something Jesus said about how we speak in Matthew 12:36-37, "*I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*" Hearing the words of Jesus and James, anyone who is truly a follower of Christ, will strive to be disciplined in how we speak. Jesus and James are clear that people who lie, speak derogatively, carelessly, and falsely will face judgment and condemnation. While that may not motivate some people to watch or change how they speak, it should motivate us.

I want to interject at this point that one of the interesting things about studying the Bible and creating sermons is that you may begin with one idea and in the process of meditating on the scripture and being open to the Holy Spirit often you see or discern something later in the creative process that you didn't see or notice in the beginning.

That was my experience looking at James 5:9-18 this week. The Letter of James is one of my favorite books in the Bible. I've read it many times and preached sermon series from James numerous times through the years. When I selected this passage for the *one another* series I was focused on the phrase in verse 16, ***“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another.”*** As I sat with James 5:9-18 throughout the week what dawned on me is that the thread running through the passage **is different ways we can choose to speak or communicate.**

I've touched on a couple already from verse 9 (grumbling), and 12 (don't swear oaths, let your yes be yes and your no be no), the theme of speech continues in verse 13, ***“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.”*** Prayers and songs of praise are forms of speech. This past week has been a difficult one for our Facilities Manager Tom Swaida and his family. Tom was at the hospital two times with one of their daughters and his Uncle Ken died yesterday morning. As the staff has tried to be supportive to Tom, we've continued to share that we're praying for him and his family. If we or someone we know is suffering James says we should pray – a form of communication - this time with God rather than another person. When life is going well and we're cheerful, James says we should sing songs of praise another form of verbal communication. If God is anything like us, then hearing some good news, gratitude, and praise must be welcome during all the cries pleading for help. God welcomes and encourages both kinds of communication.

**Prayer is the form of speech that James talks about the most in chapter 5.** He connects prayer, confession and healing. We need to acknowledge that not everyone we pray for is healed, whether that person is young or old. There is a mystery to the nature and impact of prayer we'll never fully understand. Why is one person healed and another is not? Why does one person live and another dies? Why do the prayers for one person seem to be answered and they are acquitted, and in another case, an innocent person is sent to prison or even condemned? We have to say with humility that we can't answer those questions. We don't know.

Sometimes we still experience people asking for someone to come and pray as James describes. I was here at church on Thursday afternoon when we received a call from Pleasant Bay Nursing and Rehab that a patient was actively dying, and the family

was requesting a Protestant pastor, and could I come. I said, “*Of course,*” and drove right over. I had the privilege of sitting with the man’s daughter-in-law, his son was with us from South Africa via Skype, and the 99-year-old man was in the bed and not responsive. In situations like this it’s always important to trust that the person can hear everything that’s being said. I spent over an hour with them asking questions, getting to know their family story, talking about their journey. The man was a person of faith who had attended another local church with his wife, but it became more difficult in the past number of years for them to go and the pastor they had known has retired so they didn’t know where to turn. I told them it was fine, it was a privilege for me to be with them in this sacred moment and that I knew the current pastor of the church they had attended and I could contact that person if they wished, but they said it wasn’t necessary.

I did what James says to do and I prayed that God would welcome the man soon and said hopefully things that were appropriate and fitting for that moment. When I left his daughter-in-law was very grateful and she called me on Friday to tell me that he had died early that morning and about a beautiful experience she had in his room with her daughter skyping for two hours Thursday evening. She thanked me for praying and shared how it inspired her to be able to pray with her daughter and father-in-law on Thursday night and how he had opened his beautiful blue eyes and looked right at her for one to two minutes. I’ll be leading a service for their family on Thursday morning.

Sometimes healing may not take the form of someone rising out of bed and returning to the strength and vigor of their youth. Sometimes healing is something that comes in a relationship. That’s part of what James is getting at when he says, “***Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.***” Confession is not something that Protestants in general, and Baptists in particular, have emphasized, stressed, or encouraged, but that’s to our detriment. I confess I find it humorous when people dismiss something that’s a Biblical practice or teaching and say, for example, “*That’s something Roman Catholics do.*” For example, we have ashes available at our Ash Wednesday service, not because we’re Roman Catholic, but because in the Bible placing ashes on oneself is a sign of repentance, contrition, humility and a reflection of our mortality. Likewise, confession is not just for Roman Catholics nor need it be done with a priest or a member of the clergy.

Protestants can be quick to say, *“I don’t need to confess my sins to anyone I just go directly to God.”* My first question is, *“How frequently do you actually do that?”*

Secondly, James doesn’t tell us to confess our sins to God. He says, **“confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”** It’s remarkable how almost no one confesses sin or acknowledges wrongdoing anymore. At the heart of confession is the idea that we’re not the ultimate judges of right and wrong. Confession acknowledges that we’re flawed, we make mistakes, and we’re accountable to God. James tells us to confess our sins. Listen to the public dialogue. Watch social media. The death of confession has led to the rise of the opposite of confession: blame, accusation and the denial of truth.

I’ve attended Pastor’s Prayer Summits where either in groups of three or four or even in a larger group, pastors have confessed their sins and then had other people pray for them and it’s very powerful, moving, and people have been healed in the process. Sometimes we need to hear the voice or feel the hand of another person holding our hand while they pray for us after we’ve confessed our sins. There is comfort and reassurance that comes in the context of that dynamic that’s not present when we sit by ourselves and confess our sins to the Lord alone. If the person we’re confessing our sins to is the person we have hurt, injured or wronged then our confession and mutual prayer can be even more impactful, although this isn’t always possible or advisable depending on what may need to be confessed.

James concludes verses 13-16 with the example of the prophet Elijah as an encouragement to us in our praying. **Elijah is persistent in prayer.** If you look back at the story James is referring to in 1 Kings 18:41-46, seven times Elijah prays and tells his servant to go back and look to see if there is any sign of rain. Six times the answer he gets is, *“There is nothing there,”* that’s how we often feel about prayer. We pray and look and there is nothing there. Sometimes we may give up too soon. Elijah perseveres in praying. He is not discouraged. He keeps at it and doesn’t quit. So even though he is praying faithfully, and he’s seeing nothing, and he’s hearing, *“There is nothing there,”* he keeps at it. That’s what we need to do as well. The seventh time, the servant says, *“A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.”*

Often the answer to our prayers may appear very small and insignificant. Like a small cloud on the horizon – it might look like something the wind will dissipate. But the answer to prayer can start small and gradually grow, it takes time and faith to wait and watch for it. We need to emulate Elijah's faithfulness and persistence in prayer.

**James 5 has a lot to teach us about speech and how we communicate.** We don't want to be grumblers or like those who make oaths and swear and tell people they should believe them just because they're speaking. We want to speak honestly, truthfully, and clearly and let our "Yes" be yes and our "No" be no because we remember the warning of Jesus and James that it's by our words that we'll be justified and by our words that we'll be condemned.

I pray James inspires us to use the gift of speech and communication well and powerfully by praying when we're suffering and praising God when we're cheerful. May we be humble enough to confess our faults to one another and pray for one another, so God may bring healing to bodies, relationships, souls, and even memories. May we recognize our need for patience and endurance in face of the inevitable hardships and griefs of life and may the Lord inspire us to be persistent and fervent in prayer and not grow discouraged or miss God's blessing because we give up too soon. Sometimes we may pray for a year or more before we receive an answer. Imagine if Christ followers obeyed James and didn't grumble against one another, if we confessed our sins to one another, and prayed for one another how that would bring healing and strength to your family, your small group, and our church?

**Hebrews 4:15-16**, *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

**Blessing:** The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service. The fruit of service is peace. Mother Teresa

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If someone followed you around for a week, what percentage of your communication would be classified as “*grumbling?*” Why does James say we need to be careful about how much we’re grumbling against other people?
2. What is the connection between suffering and endurance (James 5:10)? If the Lord is “*compassionate and merciful*” as James asserts, why is there suffering in the world?
3. What does James 5:12 teach about the importance of a person’s speech being truthful, honest, and clear?
4. What does James recommend we should do if we’re suffering? Cheerful? Sick? What role do you think prayer plays in healing?
5. Why do you think James connects confessing our sins to one another, praying for one another, and healing? How might confession and prayer contribute to or lead to healing? Have you ever experienced this personally?
6. James uses the example of Elijah to illustrate the importance of persistent, fervent prayer – have you ever prayed for something for years as Elijah did? What happened?
7. If we obeyed James and did not grumble against one another, confessed our sins to one another, and prayed for one another how would that strengthen a family, a small group, and our church?

1 Kings 18:41-46 (NRSV)

41 Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain.” 42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. 43 He said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” He went up and looked, and said, “There is nothing.” Then he said, “Go again seven times.” 44 At the seventh time he said, “Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.” Then he said, “Go say to Ahab, ‘Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” 45 In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. 46 But the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.