

## COMMUNITY

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JAMES 5:13-20

The [Book of James](#) is a short letter full of practical insights into Christian living.

James was a prominent leader of the early church. He uses his letter to expound on the true nature of faith and teach about the behavior and perspectives believers should embody.

His letter is packed with powerful lines and memorable imagery. It embodies many of the essential teachings and beliefs of early Christianity.

**James the Just**, or a variation of **James, brother of the Lord**, was "a brother of [Jesus](#)", according to the [New Testament](#).

[Jesus](#), after his resurrection, names James as a leader of his disciples: The disciples said to Jesus, 'We know that you will depart from us. Who will be our leader?' Jesus said to them, 'Where you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into existence'.

He was an early leader of the Jerusalem Church of the [Apostolic Age](#). He died as a [martyr](#) in AD 62 or 69 after being [stoned to death](#) by order of High Priest [Ananus ben Ananus](#).

“In fulfillment of God’s purposes ... ” That’s how the opening verses of James have described the purposive nature of God’s “generous acts of giving” and God’s “every perfect gift.”

And in God’s giving of good gifts in fulfillment of that purpose James further assures us God does not waiver — “there is no variation or shadow due to change”

The summation of that teaching is now gathered in this concluding section of the letter. Its words might be described as a confident

vision of a caring community. Such a community exercises its wisdom not in lofty exercises of philosophy or logic to bolster or entertain the self, but rather in the recognition and use of the powerful resources God has given for the care of the community in which each of us thrives through mutual benefit.

Jesus teaches us that our community to be real must include prayer, the singing of songs of praise, and the ministry of presence and touch in the laying on of hands and anointing, all while invoking the power and promise that belongs to the community in the “name of the Lord.” All of these actions assume a community that surrounds and sustains its members in their individual and personal needs.

The specific admonition to “call for the elders” for prayer and laying on of hands makes the link between individuals and the gathered community very specific.

At the beginning of James’s letter, he counseled that if we lack anything that belongs to wisdom, the correct response is to turn to God in prayer, knowing that God will respond “generously and

ungrudgingly". That confidence is now reasserted in these final words to the community. But now the power of prayer holds out some rather telling content and promise.

James speaks of its power to "save" the sick, to "raise them up," and to occasion the "forgiveness of sins". In effect the assertion is that in the community's exercise of prayer the very promise and power of the resurrection remain not just some future hope but now impinge on, recreate, and sustain a living and active community of faith.

### **Hillary was right - It takes a village!**

James emphasizes the exercise of prayer is not either by or for persons in isolation. We might imagine that such counsel jumps over the centuries in being particularly relevant to our own contemporary world.

But James speaks of a wisdom that is communal, especially in its faithful exercise of prayer. Twice he charges that confession should be "to one another," and that we should pray "for one another," if we

have any expectation that the promised healing is to take place. Such prayer exercised within and on behalf of the community has power — James says it is “effective.” It is effective because it is exercised within the context of a community endowed with God’s gifts in creation, and because it belongs to ones who have been forgiven and empowered by the implanted word of promise in Christ Jesus. In James’ language it is the prayer of ones who are “righteous.”

The power of prayer is not without its stories in the tradition of the people. The story of the faith hero Elijah is lifted up as testimonial example. By the lifting up of such examples our own communities of faith are also encouraged. We need to find fitting ways to add our own stories and our own experiences to the rich ongoing tradition that confirms with conviction and confirmation the power of God’s gifts to bring salvation and healing to the community of faith.

Families need to continue to care for one another. And that includes those who are at risk. Once again there is an honest recognition that there will be some who will “wander from the truth”. This, too, each

of us can testify from our own personal and communal experience. On such occasions there will need to be those among the community who care enough to “turn them around” and bring them back. We need to know that such efforts of bringing back a wandering brother or sister are worth the effort, because in them we can know that God’s salvation is at work. In all its actions of caring, sustaining, and healing one another the community is bearing witness to the fact that God’s work of salvation continues in the involvement and actions of a caring community that exercises its actions confidently in the name of Jesus.

Whenever I think of James’ picture of the poisonous tongue in James 3:1-12, I think of the way human gossip works, or the way, in small groups, we will speak uncharitably about others, our neighbors or so-called friends.

It seems like a preeminently churchy sort of text, where we spend a lot of time talking, often to no good end and maybe to some evil

ends. Slander, malicious talk — or just talk that only begets more talk — that’s deadly, according to James.

According to James, the tongue, so seemingly small, produces massive disasters: “A forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire” (James 3:5b-6a). Of all the creatures of the world, the tongue alone refuses to be tamed — “it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8b). The speech that flows from the tongue is like well-water contaminated with salt; it cannot produce potable water (James 3:12).

Today we are a very individualist oriented culture. Self-help books proliferate on our bookshelves. And even our so-called “social media” is often structured or utilized primarily to focus on exalting individual identities and chalking up the greatest number of “friends” on our tally sheets (friends for whom the greatest insult might be that in a fit of pique I might “unfriend” them at any moment).

And, yet, according to James 5:13-20, there are forms of speech that produce good things. In James 5:13-20, James exhorts the community to form itself in non-abstract speech acts, including gathering for prayers among people who know pain, or offering songs of praise, and sharing confessions of sin, that the community might be reconciled, that it might actually and physically exist. Not least, he says, remember the stories of your ancestors as you face your own trials and tribulations. Elijah was just like us! In other words, speech that is peaceful, pure, gentle, and just contributes to the restoration of actual community.

Maybe the kind of speech recommended in James 5:13-20 is the antidote to the double-minded speech of James 3:1-12. The latter comes from below while the former comes from above. For James, there is a clear line of demarcation between the two. You know the difference by what they, respectively, produce. Wisdom from below produces division, disorder, and rancor; the other, wisdom from above, is pure, peaceable, and gentle.



Speech that produces rancor rather than a harvest of righteousness can be seen in the “happy talk” that heaps praise on the so-called connectivity of the internet: “... the Internet has not spread liberty around the world. On the contrary, the world is less free, in part because of the Web.” The intelligence of the internet is not merely a parallel or rival to its human counterpart. The “tongue of the internet” isn’t so much used as it is a systemic user; we are not consuming its products, but instead, through myriad interactions, algorithms, and data bases, we are the product that is being manufactured and ultimately consumed.

It may not be too much to say that the Internet is a rival creator, that would make us in its own image; the Internet will settle for your soul. The racist oligarchies that are emerging behind the Internet today want you on the couch, outraged or elated, it doesn’t matter which, so long as you are dissipated at the end of the day... The Internet creates a sense of ‘us and them’ inside a country, and an experience that *feels* like politics but involves no actual policy.

But how do our acts as a community formed in the image of God reflect God? If someone is suffering, let them pray. If someone is happy, let them sing songs of praise. If someone is sick, ask the elders to come and anoint them with oil and pray for their healing. Confess your sins to one another. Be reconciled. Be renewed. Be whole. Learn from people like Elijah, who was just like us, and whose prayers were powerful and effective amid natural and political droughts. Restore one another to the community forged in God's image. In other words, our theological language is meaningless apart from the way our language fosters the whole human experience, including the testimony of those the powers call orphans, widows, and immigrants.

James has described the ideal of a congregation that lives cooperatively, harmoniously, in concord with heaven's peaceable grace — and that repudiates wrangling, privilege, and domination.

James addresses communities more than individuals (“to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora,” 1:1), and he promotes an ethic of integrity that emphasizes building one another up.

A congregation under the influence of James would be committed to sharing each other’s burdens and joys. James envisions a community where class and poverty do not divide disciples; he applies the same logic to grief and illness and sin. If one member is sick, the whole congregation is weaker. Anyone who is afflicted should feel confident to ask for help from their neighbors, and the congregation’s leaders will pray on their behalf and treat them with oil in the name of the Lord.

James advocates a model of community that admits no distinction between rich and poor, with regard to health as well as to wealth.

In the cases of both physical infirmity and spiritual infirmity manifested in sins, James believes that our faithful solidarity and sharing are effectual in remedying our weakness. This is surely true

in plain, common-sense ways; we care for one another by paying attention to symptoms of illness, by providing the resources for health, by guarding against irresistible temptations, by living up to others' high expectations of us. But James also trusts that forces greater than common sense will support and amplify our well-being. Thus, in verse 19, James encourages his audience to strive to bring back a neighbor who "wanders from the truth," which restoration will have positive effects not only for the reformed sinner but also, apparently, for those who restore the sinner to "the truth" (5:20). Confession brings with it the assurance of God's forgiveness; prayerful anointing ("the prayer of faith," 5:15; "the prayer of the righteous," 5:16) will, in James's ideal congregation, powerfully and effectually remedy both spiritual and physical ailments.

The benefits of our caring for one another are not always (we may even say not usually) immediately obvious. James therefore reminds the congregation that faithfulness requires patience (5:7-11). At the same time, James considers Elijah the example of someone who,

although human in every way, wrought extraordinary effects by his righteousness and his confident prayer. By citing both the importance of patience and the actual example of Elijah, James frames his exhortation so as to underscore both the possibility of miraculous fulfillment of our prayers, and the inevitable unlikelihood that we will witness such a dramatic response.

Thus, James echoes Jesus' own call to perfect obedience, to consistent truthfulness, to whole-hearted faithfulness, and to community without favoritism.

In a nutshell what does this mean. **Members of a community bear a mutual responsibility for each other.**

**This is not easy to do today.**

We retreat into our homes. Our porches are on the back of our houses in our private backyards. Certainly, those who are well bear a responsibility to help those who are not. But those who are struggling or are ill would seem to bear the reverse responsibility:

that they share their struggles — health related or otherwise — with those who are available.

It is often harder to ask for or receive help than it is to give it. What this text in James indicates is that this is an essential aspect of the Christian community — that we be involved in each other's lives, helping each other in our physical and spiritual journeys.

All of which makes me wonder: is our zeal for the gospel — or perhaps, more honestly, our fear of those who are different from us — placing a stumbling block before persons of other faiths that makes it harder to see and feel the love of God in Christ? If so, what should our response be to those who believe in a faith different from our own or who have no faith whatsoever?

Rather than simply ask, “What would Jesus *do*?” we might instead point to “what Jesus actually *did*.” In this case, Jesus says not to stop someone who is doing good even if they're not a member of your group, not to refuse the help of someone even if you don't know

whether they believe, and not to place stumbling blocks in way of *anyone* who is in need or vulnerable. He concludes by saying, “be at peace with one another.”

On the anniversary of September 11th two weeks ago, [Brian McLaren wrote the following](#): “to love your neighbor of another faith means to seek to understand her, to learn to see the world from her perspective, to stand with her, as it were, so that you can feel what she feels and maybe even come to understand why she loves what she loves.” I agree. And I think we can make a case based on what Jesus actually did — here and throughout the Gospel — that he would too.

“Every time you draw a line between who’s in and who’s out, you’ll find Jesus on the other side.” Here’s the thing: our communities and world are only getting more pluralistic, more complex, and more diverse, which means that our people are likely to meet and get to know persons of different faiths (or no faith) in the workplace, at school, the PTA, and more. So perhaps this week’s reading provides

a good opportunity to reflect with them on our Christian responsibility to those who believe differently.

Two thousand years later after inquisitions, the Holocaust and Northern Ireland and the Balkans and 9/11 and the religious outrage and violence of recent days in the Middle East... After all of this, can we not also imagine that Jesus calls us to be at peace with those who name God differently or are not able to name God at all? Can we not imagine that Jesus would have us not only tolerate those of other faith traditions but also seek their welfare?

Can we not imagine Jesus calling us to understand them, love them, and in all these ways “be at peace with one another”?

We are called to confess Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, and part of that confession, I believe, is to love our neighbors in word and deed no matter what they may confess.

AMEN



