

CHAPTER 5

In this chapter the apostle denounces the judgments of God upon those rich men who oppress the poor, showing them how great their sin and folly are in the sight of God, and how grievous the punishments would be which should fall upon themselves (v. 1-6). Hereupon, all the faithful are exhorted to patience under their trials and sufferings (v. 7-11). The sin of swearing is cautioned against (v. 12). We are directed how to act, both under affliction and in prosperity (v. 13). Prayer for the sick, and anointing with oil, are prescribed (v. 14, 15). Christians are directed to acknowledge their faults one to another, and to pray one for another, and the efficacy of prayer is proved (v. 16-18). And, lastly, it is recommended to us to do what we can for bringing back those that stray from the ways of truth.

~~500~~ JAMES 5:1-11

WARNINGS TO THE RICH

The apostle is here addressing first sinners and then saints.

I. Let us consider the address to sinners; and here we find James seconding what his great Master had said: *Woe unto you that are rich; for you have received your consolation*, ~~400~~ Luke 6:24. The rich people to whom this word of warning was sent were not such as professed the Christian religion, but the worldly and unbelieving Jews, such as are here said *to condemn and kill the just*, which the Christians had no power to do; and though this epistle was written for the sake of the faithful, and was sent principally to them, yet, by an apostrophe, the infidel Jews may be well supposed here spoken to. They would not hear the word, and therefore it is *written*, that they might read it. It is observable, in the very first inscription of this epistle, that it is not directed, as Paul's epistles were, *to the brethren in Christ*, but, in general, *to the twelve tribes*; and the salutation is not, *grace and peace from Christ*, but, in general, *greeting*, ~~500~~ James 1:1. The poor among the Jews received the gospel, and many of them believed; but the generality of the rich rejected Christianity, and were hardened in their unbelief, and hated and persecuted those who

believed on Christ. To these oppressing, unbelieving, persecuting, rich people, the apostle addresses himself in the first six verses.

1. He foretels the judgments of God that should come upon them, v. 1-3. they should have miseries come upon them, and such dreadful miseries that the very apprehension of them was enough to make them weep and howl — misery that should arise from the very things in which they placed their happiness, and misery that should be completed by these things witnessing against them at the last, to their utter destruction; and they are now called to reason upon and thoroughly to weigh the matter, and to think how they will stand before God in judgment: *Go to now, you rich men.*

(1.) “You may be assured of this that very dreadful calamities are coming upon you, calamities that shall carry nothing of support nor comfort in them, but all misery, misery in time, misery to eternity, misery in your outward afflictions, misery in your inward frame and temper of mind, misery in this world, misery in hell. You have not a single instance of misery only coming upon you, but miseries. The ruin of your church and nation is at hand; and there will come a day of wrath, when riches shall not profit men, but *all the wicked shall be destroyed.*”

(2.) The very apprehension of such miseries as were coming upon them is enough to make them weep and howl. Rich men are apt to say to themselves (and others are ready to say to them), *Eat, drink, and be merry*; but God says, *Weep and howl*. It is not said, *Weep and repent*, for this the apostle does not expect from them (he speaks in a way of denouncing rather than admonishing); but, “*Weep and howl*, for when your doom comes there will be nothing but *weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth.*” Those who live like beasts are called howl like such. Public calamities are most grievous to rich people, who live in pleasure, and are secure and sensual; and therefore they shall weep and howl more than other people for the miseries that shall come upon them.

(3.) Their misery shall arise from the very things in which they placed their happiness. “Corruption, decay, rust, and ruin, will come upon all your goodly things: *Your riches are corrupted and your garments are moth-eaten*, v. 2. Those things which you now inordinately affect will hereafter insupportably wound you: they will be of no worth, of no use to you, but, on the contrary, will *pierce you through with many sorrows*; for,”

(4.) “*They will witness against you, and they will eat your flesh as it were fire,*” v. 3. Things inanimate are frequently represented in scripture as witnessing against wicked men. Heaven, earth, the stones of the field, the production of the ground, and here the very rust and canker of ill-gotten and ill-kept treasures, are said to witness against impious rich men. They think to heap up treasure for their latter days, to live plentifully upon when they come to be old; but, alas! they are only heaping up treasures to become a prey to others (as the Jews had all taken from them by the Romans), and treasures that will prove at last to be only treasures of wrath, *in the day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God*. Then shall their iniquities, in the punishment of them, *eat their flesh as it were with fire*. In the ruin of Jerusalem, many thousands perished by fire; in the last judgment the wicked shall be condemned to *everlasting burnings, prepared for the devil and his angels*. The Lord deliver us from the portion of wicked rich men! and, in order to this, let us take care that we do not fall into their sins, which we are next to consider.

2. The apostle shows what those sins are which should bring such miseries. To be in so deplorable a condition must doubtless be owing to some very heinous crimes.

(1.) Covetousness is laid to the charge of this people; they laid by their garments till they bred moths and were eaten; they hoarded up their gold and silver till they were rusty and cankered. It is a very great disgrace to these things that they carry in them the principles of their own corruption and consumption — the garment breeds the moth that frets it, the gold and silver breeds the canker that eats it; but the disgrace falls most heavily upon those who hoard and lay up these things till they come to be thus corrupted, and cankered, and eaten. God gives us our worldly possessions that we may honour him and do good with them; but if, instead of this, we sinfully hoard them up, thorough and undue affection towards them, or a distrust of the providence of God for the future, this is a very heinous crime, and will be witnessed against by the very rust and corruption of the treasure thus heaped together.

(2.) Another sin charged upon those against whom James writes is oppression: *Behold, the hire of the labourers, who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth, etc.*, v. 4. Those who have wealth in their hands get power into their hands, and then they are tempted to abuse that power to oppress such as are under them. The rich

we here find employing the poor in their labours, and the rich have as much need of the labours of the poor as the poor have of wages from the rich, and could as ill be without them; but yet, not considering this, they kept back the hire of the labourers; having power in their hands, it is probable that they made as hard bargains with the poor as they could, and even after that would not make good their bargains as they should have done. This is a crying sin, an iniquity that cries so as to reach the ears of God; and, in this case, God is to be considered as *the Lord of sabaoth*, or *the Lord of hosts*, *Kyriou sabaoth*, a phrase often used in the Old-Testament, when the people of God were defenseless and wanted protection, and when their enemies were numerous and powerful. The Lord of hosts, who has all ranks of beings and creatures at his disposal, and who sets all in their several places, hears the oppressed when they cry by reason of the cruelty or injustice of the oppressor, and he will give orders to some of those hosts that are under him (angels, devils, storms, distempers, or the like) to avenge the wrongs done to those who are dealt with unrighteously and unmercifully. Take heed of this sin of defrauding and oppressing, and avoid the very appearances of it.

(3.) Another sin here mentioned is sensuality and voluptuousness. *You have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton*, v. 5. God does not forbid us to use pleasure; but to live in them as if we lived for nothing else is a very provoking sin; and to do this on the earth, where we are but strangers and pilgrims, where we are but to continue for a while, and where we ought to be preparing for eternity — this, this is a grievous aggravation of the sin of voluptuousness. Luxury makes people wanton, as in ³¹⁰⁶Hosea 13:6, *According to their pasture, so were they filled; they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore have they forgotten me.* Wantonness and luxury are commonly the effects of great plenty and abundance; it is hard for people to have great plenty and abundance; it is hard for people to have great estates, and not too much indulge themselves in carnal, sensual pleasures: “*You have nourished your hearts as in a day of slaughter: you live as if it were every day a day of sacrifices, a festival; and hereby your hearts are fattened and nourished to stupidity, dulness, pride, and an insensibility to the wants and afflictions of others.*” Some may say, “What harm is there in good cheer, provided people do not spend above what they have?” What! Is it no harm for people to make gods of their bellies, and to give all to these, instead of abounding in acts of charity and piety? Is it no harm for people to unfit themselves for minding

the concerns of their souls, by indulging the appetites of their bodies? Surely that which brought flames upon Sodom, and would bring these miseries for which rich men are here called to weep and howl, must be a heinous evil! Pride, and idleness, and fullness of bread, mean the same thing with living in pleasure, and being wanton, and nourishing the heart as in a day of slaughter.

(4.) Another sin here charged on the rich is persecution: *You have condemned and killed the just, and he doth not resist you*, v. 6. This fills up the measure of their iniquity. They oppressed and acted very unjustly, to get estates; when they had them, they gave way to luxury and sensuality, till they had lost all sense and feeling of the wants or afflictions of others; and then they persecute and kill without remorse. They pretend to act legally indeed, they condemn before they kill; but unjust prosecutions, whatever colour of law they may carry in them, will come into the reckoning when God shall make inquisition for blood, as well as massacres and downright murders. Observe here, The just may be condemned and killed: but then again observe, When such do suffer, and yield without resistance to the unjust sentence of oppressors, this is marked by God, to the honour of the sufferers and the infamy of their persecutors; this commonly shows that judgments are at the door, and we may certainly conclude that a reckoning-day will come, to reward the patience of the oppressed and to break to pieces the oppressor. Thus far the address to sinners goes.

II. We have next subjoined an address to saints. Some have been ready to despise or to condemn this way of preaching, when ministers, in their application, have brought a word to sinners, and a word to saints; but, from the apostle's here taking this method, we may conclude that this is the best way rightly to divide the word of truth. From what has been said concerning wicked and oppressing rich men, occasion is given to administer comfort to God's afflicted people: "Be patient therefore; since God will send such miseries on the wicked, you may see what is your duty, and where your greatest encouragement lies."

1. Attend to your duty: *Be patient* (v. 7), *establish your hearts* (v. 8), *grudge not one against another, brethren*, v. 9. Consider well the meaning of these three expressions: —

(1.) “*Be patient* — bear your afflictions without murmuring, your injuries without revenge; and, though God should not in any signal manner appear for you immediately, wait for him. *The vision is for an appointed time; at the end it will speak, and will not lie; therefore wait for it. It is but a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.* Let your patience be lengthened out to long suffering;” so the word here used, *makrothymesate*, signifies. When we have done our work, we have need of patience to stay for our reward. This Christian patience is not a mere yielding to necessity, as the moral patience taught by some philosophers was, but it is a humble acquiescence in the wisdom and will of God, with an eye to a future glorious recompense: *Be patient to the coming of the Lord.* And because this is a lesson Christians must learn, though ever so hard or difficult to the, it is repeated in v. 8, *Be you also patient.*

(2.) “*Establish your hearts* — let your faith be firm, without wavering, your practice of what is good constant and continued, without tiring, and your resolutions for God and heaven fixed, in spite of all sufferings or temptations.” The prosperity of the wicked and the affliction of the righteous have in all ages been a very great trial to the faith of the people of God. David tells us *that his feet were almost gone, when he saw the prosperity of the wicked,* ^{PSALM} Psalm 73:2, 3. Some of those Christians to whom St. James wrote might probably be in the same tottering condition; and therefore they are called upon to establish their hearts; faith and patience will establish the heart.

(3.) *Grudge not one against another;* the words *me stenazete* signify, *Groan* not one against another, that is, “Do not make one another uneasy by your murmuring groans at what befalls you, nor by your distrustful groans as to what may further come upon you, nor by your revengeful groans against the instruments of your sufferings, nor by your envious groans at those who may be free from your calamities: do not make yourselves uneasy and make one another uneasy by thus groaning to and grieving one another.” “The apostle seemeth to me” (says Dr. Manton) “to be here taxing those mutual injuries and animosities wherewith the Christians of those times, having banded under the names of *circumcision* and *uncircumcision*, did grieve one another, and give each other cause to groan; so that they did not only sigh under the oppressions of the rich persecutors, but under the injuries which they sustained from many of the brethren who, together with them, did profess the holy faith.” Those who are in the midst of common enemies, and in any suffering circumstances,

should be more especially careful not to grieve nor to groan against one another, otherwise judgments will come upon them as well as others; and the more such grudgings prevail the nearer do they show judgment to be.

2. Consider what encouragement here is for Christians to be patient, to establish their hearts, and not to grudge one against another. And,

(1.) “Look to the example of the husbandman: *He waits for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.* When you sow your corn in the ground, you wait many months for the former and latter rain, and are willing to stay till harvest for the fruit of your labour; and shall not this teach you to bear a few storms, and to be patient for a season, when you are looking for a kingdom and everlasting felicity? Consider him that waits for a crop of corn; and will not you wait for a crown of glory? If you should be called to wait a little longer than the husbandman does, is it not something proportionably greater and infinitely more worth your waiting for? But,”

(2.) “Think how short your waiting time may possibly be: *The coming of the Lord draweth nigh, v. 8; behold, the Judge standeth before the door, v. 9.* Do not be impatient, do not quarrel with one another; the great Judge, who will set all to rights, who will punish the wicked and reward the good, is at hand: he should be conceived by you to stand as near as one who is just knocking at the door.” *The coming of the Lord* to punish the wicked Jews was then very nigh, when James wrote this epistle; and, whenever the patience and other graces of his people are tried in an extraordinary manner, the certainty of Christ's coming as Judge, and the nearness of it, should establish their hearts. The Judge is now a great deal nearer, in his coming to judge the world, than when this epistle was written, nearer by above seventeen hundred years; and therefore this should have the greater effect upon us.

(3.) The danger of our being condemned when the Judge appears should excite us to mind our duty as before laid down: *Grudge not, lest you be condemned.* Fretfulness and discontent expose us to the just judgment of God, and we bring more calamities upon ourselves by our murmuring, distrustful, envious groans and grudgings against one another, than we are aware of. If we avoid these evils, and be patient under our trials, God will not condemn us. Let us encourage ourselves with this.

(4.) We are encouraged to be patient by the example of the prophets (v. 10): *Take the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.* Observe here, The prophets, on whom God put the greatest honour, and for whom he had the greatest favour, were most afflicted: and, when we think that the best men have had the hardest usage in this world, we should hereby be reconciled to affliction. Observe further, Those who were the greatest examples of suffering affliction were also the best and greatest examples of patience: *tribulation worketh patience.* Hereupon James gives it to us as the common sense of the faithful (v. 11): *We count those happy who endure:* we look upon righteous and patient sufferers as the happiest people. See ~~502~~James 1:2-12.

(5.) Job also is proposed as an example for the encouragement of the afflicted. *You have hard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord,* etc., v. 11. In the case of Job you have an instance of a variety of miseries, and of such as were very grievous, but under all he could bless God, and, as to the general bent of his spirit, he was patient and humble: and what came to him in the end? Why, truly, God accomplished and brought about those things for him which plainly prove that *the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.* The best way to bear afflictions is to look to the end of them; and the pity of God is such that he will not delay the bringing of them to an end when his purposes are once answered; and the tender mercy of God is such that he will make his people an abundant amends for all their sufferings and afflictions. His bowels are moved for them while suffering, his bounty is manifested afterwards. Let us serve our God, and endure our trials, as those who believe the end will crown all.

~~502~~ JAMES 5:12-20

CAUTION AGAINST SWEARING

This epistle now drawing to a close, the penman goes off very quickly from one thing to another: hence it is that matters so very different are insisted on in these few verses.

I. The sin of swearing is cautioned against: *But above all things, my brethren, swear not,* etc., v. 12. Some understand this too restrictedly, as if the meaning were, “Swear not at your persecutors, at *those that reproach*

you and say all manner of evil of you; be not put into a passion by the injuries they do you, so as in your passion to be provoked to swear.” This swearing is no doubt forbidden here: and it will not excuse those that are guilty of this sin to say they swear only when they are provoked to it, and before they are aware. But the apostle's warning extends to other occasions of swearing as well as this. Some have translated the words, *pro panton* — *before all things*; and so have made sense of this place to be that they should not, in common conversation, *before every thing they say*, put an oath. All customary needless swearing is undoubtedly forbidden, and all along in scripture condemned, as a very grievous sin. Profane swearing was very customary among the Jews, and, since this epistle is directed in general *to the twelve tribes scattered abroad* (as before has been observed), we may conceive this exhortation sent to those who believed not. It is hard to suppose that swearing should be one of the spots of God's children, since Peter, when he was charged with being a disciple of Christ and would disprove the charge, cursed and swore, thereby thinking most effectually to convince them that he was no disciple of Jesus, it being well known of such that they durst not allow themselves in swearing; but possibly some of the looser sort of those who were called Christians might, among other sins here charged upon them, be guilty also of this. It is a sin that in later years has most scandalously prevailed, even among those who would be thought above all others entitled to the Christian name and privileges. It is very rare indeed to hear of a dissenter from the church of England who is guilty of swearing, but among those who glory in their being of the established church nothing is more common; and indeed the most execrable oaths and curses now daily wound the ears and hearts of all serious Christians. James here says,

1. *Above all things, swear not;* but how many are there who mind this the least of all things, and who make light of nothing so much as common profane swearing! But why *above all things* is swearing here forbidden?

(1.) Because it strikes most directly at the honour of God and most expressly throws contempt upon his name and authority.

(2.) Because this sin has, of all sins, the least temptation to it: it is not gain, nor pleasure, nor reputation, that can move men to it, but a wantonness in sinning, and a needless showing an enmity to God. *Thy enemies take thy name in vain,* ^(DB) Psalm 139:20. This is a proof of men's

being enemies to God, however they may pretend to call themselves by his name, or sometimes to compliment him in acts of worship.

(3.) Because it is with most difficulty left off when once men are accustomed to it, therefore it should above all things be watched against. And,

(4.) *“Above all things swear not, for how can you expect the name of God should be a strong tower to you in your distress if you profane it and play with it at other times?”* But (as Mr. Baxter observes) *“all this is so far from forbidding necessary oaths that it is but to confirm them, by preserving the due reverence of them.”* And then he further notes that *“The true nature of an oath is, by our speech, to pawn the reputation of some certain or great thing, for the averring of a doubted less thing; and not (as is commonly held) an appeal to God or other judge.”* Hence it was that swearing by the heavens, and by the earth, and by the other oaths the apostle refers to, came to be in use. The Jews thought if they did but omit the great oath of *Chi-Eloah*, they were safe. But they grew so profane as to swear by the creature, as if it were God; and so advanced it into the place of God; while, on the other hand, those who swear commonly and profanely by the name of God do hereby put him upon the level with every common thing.

2. *But let your yea be yea, and your nay nay; lest you fall into condemnation;* that is, *“let it suffice you to affirm or deny a thing as there is occasion, and be sure to stand to your word, and be true to it, so as to give no occasion for your being suspected of falsehood; and then you will be kept from the condemnation of backing what you say or promise by rash oaths, and from profaning the name of God to justify yourselves. It is being suspected of falsehood that leads men to swearing. Let it be known that you keep to truth, and are firm to your word, and by this means you will find there is no need to swear to what you say. Thus shall you escape the condemnation which is expressly annexed to the third commandment: The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”*

II. As Christians we are taught to suit ourselves to the dispensations of Providence (v. 13): *Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms.* Our condition in this world is various; and our wisdom is to submit to its being so, and to behave as becomes us both in prosperity and under affliction. Sometimes we are in sadness,

sometimes in mirth; God has set these one over against the other that we may the better observe the several duties he enjoins, and that the impressions made on our passions and affections may be rendered serviceable to our devotions. Afflictions should put us upon prayer, and prosperity should make us abound in praise. Not that prayer is to be confined to a time of trouble, nor singing to a time of mirth; but these several duties may be performed with special advantage, and to the happiest purposes, at such seasons.

1. In a day of affliction nothing is more seasonable than prayer. The person afflicted must pray himself, as well as engage the prayers of others for him. Times of affliction should be praying times. To this end God sends afflictions, that we may be engaged to seek him early; and that those who at other times have neglected him may be brought to enquire after him. The spirit is then most humble, the heart is broken and tender; and prayer is most acceptable to God when it comes from a contrite humble spirit. Afflictions naturally draw out complaints; and to whom should we complain but to God in prayer? It is necessary to exercise faith and hope under afflictions; and prayer is the appointed means both for obtaining and increasing these graces in us. *Is any afflicted? Let him pray.*

2. In a day of mirth and prosperity singing psalms is very proper and seasonable. In the original it is only said *sing, psallete*, without the addition of psalms or any other word: and we learn from the writings of several in the first ages of Christianity (particularly from a letter of Pliny's, and from some passages in Justin Martyr and Tertullian) that the Christians were accustomed to sing hymns, either taken out of scripture, or of more private composure, in their worship of God. Though some have thought that Paul's advising both the Colossians and Ephesians to *speaking to one another psalms kai hymns kai odas pneumatikas* — in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, refers only to the compositions of scripture, the psalms of David being distinguished in Hebrew by *Shurim, Tehillim, and Mizmorim*, words that exactly answer these of the apostle. Let that be as it will, this however we are sure of, that the singing of psalms is a gospel ordinance, and that our joy should be holy joy, consecrated to God. Singing is so directed to here as to show that, if any be in circumstances of mirth and prosperity, he should turn his mirth, though alone, and by himself, in this channel. Holy mirth becomes families and retirements, as well as public assemblies. Let our singing be

such as to make *melody with our hearts unto the Lord*, and God will assuredly be well pleased with this kind of devotion.

III. We have particular directions given as to sick persons, and *healing pardoning mercy promised* upon the observance of those directions. *If any be sick*, they are required,

- 1.** To *send for the elders, presbyterous tes ekklesias* — the presbyters, pastors or ministers of the church, v. 14, 15. It lies upon sick people as a duty to send for ministers, and to desire their assistance and their prayers.
- 2.** It is the duty of ministers to pray over the sick, when thus desired and called for. *Let them pray over him*; let their prayers be suited to his case, and their intercessions be as becomes those who are affected with his calamities.
- 3.** In the times of miraculous healing, the *sick were to be anointed with oil in the name of the Lord*. Expositors generally confine this anointing with oil to such as had the power of working miracles; and, when miracles ceased, this institution ceased also. In Mark's gospel we read of the apostle's anointing with oil many that were sick, and healing them, ⁴⁰⁶³Mark 6:13. And we have accounts of this being practiced in the church two hundred years after Christ; but then the gift of healing also accompanied it, and, when the miraculous gift ceased, this rite was laid aside. The papists indeed have made a sacrament of this, which they call *the extreme unction*. They use it, not to heal the sick, as it was used by the apostles; but as they generally run counter to scripture, in the appointments of their church, so here they ordain that this should be administered only to such as are at the very point of death. The apostle's anointing was in order to heal the disease; the popish anointing is for the expulsion of the relics of sin, and to enable the soul (as they pretend) the better to combat with the powers of the air. When they cannot prove, by any visible effects, that Christ owns them in the continuance of this rite, they would however have people to believe that the invisible effects are very wonderful. But it is surely much better to omit this anointing with oil than to turn it quite contrary to the purposes spoken of in scripture. Some protestants have thought that this anointing was only permitted or approved by Christ, not instituted. But it should seem, by the words of James here, that it was a thing enjoined in cases where there was faith for healing. And some protestants have argued for it with this view. It was not

to be commonly used, not even in the apostolical age; and some have thought that it should not be wholly laid aside in any age, but that where there are extraordinary measures of faith in the person anointing, and in those who are anointed, an extraordinary blessing may attend the observance of this direction for the sick. However that be, there is one thing carefully to be observed here, that the saving of the sick is not ascribed to the *anointing with oil*, but to prayer: *The prayer of faith shall save the sick*, etc., v. 15. So that,

4. Prayer over the sick must proceed from, and be accompanied with, a lively faith. There must be faith both in the person praying and in the person prayed for. In a time of sickness, it is not the cold and formal prayer that is effectual, but the prayer of faith.

5. We should observe the success of prayer. The Lord shall raise up; that is, if he be a person capable and fit for deliverance, and if God have any thing further for such a person to do in the world. *And, if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him*; that is, where sickness is sent as a punishment for some particular sin, that sin shall be pardoned, and in token thereof the sickness shall be removed. As when Christ said to the impotent man, *Go and sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee*, it is intimated that some particular sin was the cause of his sickness. The great thing therefore we should beg of God for ourselves and others in the time of sickness is the pardon of sin. Sin is both the root of sickness and the sting of it. If sin be pardoned, either affliction shall be removed in mercy or we shall see there is mercy in the continuance of it. When healing is founded upon pardon, we may say as Hezekiah did: *Thou hast, in love to my soul, delivered it from the pit of corruption*, ~~287~~ Isaiah 38:17. When you are sick and in pain, it is most common to pray and cry, *O give me ease! O restore me to health!* But your prayer should rather and chiefly be, *O that God would pardon my sins!*

IV. Christians are directed to *confess their faults one to another, and so to join in their prayers with an for one another*, v. 16. Some expositors connect this with v. 14. As if when sick people send for ministers to pray over them they should then confess their faults to them. Indeed, where any are conscious that their sickness is a vindictive punishment of some particular sin, and they cannot look for the removal of their sickness without particular applications to God for the pardon of such a sin, there it may be proper to acknowledge and tell his case, that those who pray over

him may know how to plead rightly for him. But the confession here required is that of Christians to one another, and not, as the papists would have it, to a priest. Where persons have injured one another, acts of injustice must be confessed to those against whom they have been committed. Where persons have tempted one another to sin or have consented in the same evil actions, there they ought mutually to blame themselves and excite each other to repentance. Where crimes are of a public nature, and have done any public mischief, there they ought to be more publicly confessed, so as may best reach to all who are concerned. And sometimes it may be well to confess our faults to some prudent minister or praying friend, that he may help us to plead with God for mercy and pardon. But then we are not to think that James puts us upon telling every thing that we are conscious is amiss in ourselves or in one another; but so far as confession is necessary to our reconciliation with such as are at variance with us, or for gaining information in any point of conscience and making our own spirits quiet and easy, so far we should be ready to confess our faults. And sometimes also it may be of good use to Christians to disclose their peculiar weaknesses and infirmities to one another, where there are great intimacies and friendships, and where they may help each other by their prayers to obtain pardon of their sins and power against them. Those who make confession of their faults one to another should thereupon pray with and for one another. The 13th verse directs persons to pray for themselves: *Is any afflicted let him pray*; the 14th directs to seek for the prayers of ministers; and the 16th directs private Christians to pray one for another; so that here we have all sorts of prayer (ministerial, social, and secret) recommended.

V. The great advantage and efficacy of prayer are declared and proved: *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*, whether he pray for himself or for others: witness the example of Elias, v. 17, 18. He who prays must be a righteous man; not righteous in an absolute sense (for this Elias was not, who is here made a pattern to us), but righteous in a gospel sense; not loving nor approving of any iniquity. *If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear my prayer*, ¹⁹¹⁸ Psalm 66:18. Further, the prayer itself must be a fervent, in-wrought, well-wrought prayer. It must be a pouring out of the heart to God; and it must proceed from a faith unfeigned. Such prayer avails much. It is of great advantage to ourselves, it may be very beneficial to our friends, and we are assured of its being acceptable to God. It is good having those for friends whose prayers are

available in the sight of God. The power of prayer is here proved from the success of Elijah. This may be encouraging to us even in common cases, if we consider that Elijah was *a man of like passions with us*. He was a zealous good man and a very great man, but he had his infirmities, and was subject to disorder in his passions as well as others. In prayer we must not look to the merit of man, but to the grace of God. Only in this we should copy after Elijah, that he prayed earnestly, or, as it is in the original, *in prayer he prayed*. It is not enough to say a prayer, but we must pray in prayer. Our thoughts must be fixed, our desires firm and ardent, and our graces in exercise; and, when we thus pray in prayer, we shall speed in prayer. Elijah *prayed that it might not rain*; and God heard him in his pleading against an idolatrous persecuting country, so that it *rained not on the earth for the space of three years and six months*. Again he *prayed, and the heaven gave rain*, etc. Thus you see prayer is the key which opens and shuts heaven. To this there is an allusion, ¹¹⁶ Revelation 11:6, where the two witnesses are said to have power *to shut heaven, that it rain not*. This instance of the extraordinary efficacy of prayer is recorded for encouragement even to ordinary Christians to be instant and earnest in prayer. God never says to any of the seed of Jacob, *Seek my face in vain*. If Elijah by prayer could do such great and wonderful things, surely the prayers of no righteous man shall return void. Where there may not be so much of a miracle in God's answering our prayers, yet there may be as much of grace.

VI. This epistle concludes with an exhortation to do all we can in our places to promote the conversion and salvation of others, v. 19, 20. Some interpret these verses as an apology which the apostle is making for himself that he should so plainly and sharply reprove the Jewish Christians for their many faults and errors. And certainly James gives a very good reason why he was so much concerned to reclaim them from their errors, because in thus doing he should save souls, and hide a multitude of sins. But we are not to restrain this place to the apostle's converting such as erred from the truth; no, nor to other ministerial endeavours of the like nature, since it is said, "If any err, and one convert him, let him be who he will that does so good an office for another, he is therein an instrument of saving a soul from death." Those whom the apostle here calls brethren, he yet supposes liable to err. It is no mark of a wise or a holy man to boast of his being free from error, or to refuse to acknowledge when he is in an error. But if any do err, be they ever so great, you must not be afraid to

show them their error; and, be they ever so weak and little, you must not disdain to make them wiser and better. If they err from the truth, that is, from the gospel (the great rule and standard of truth), whether it be in opinion or practice, you must endeavour to bring them again to the rule. Errors in judgment and in life generally go together. There is some doctrinal mistake at the bottom of every practical miscarriage. There is no one habitually bad, but upon some bad principle. Now to convert such is to reduce them from their error, and to reclaim them from the evils they have been led into. We are not presently to accuse and exclaim against an erring brother, and seek to bring reproaches and calamities upon him, but to convert him: and, if by all our endeavours we cannot do this, yet we are nowhere empowered to persecute and destroy him. If we are instrumental in the conversion of any, *we* are said to convert them, though this be principally and efficiently the work of God. And, if we can do no more towards the conversion of sinners, yet we may do this — pray for the grace and Spirit of God to convert and change them. And let those that are in any way serviceable to convert others know what will be the happy consequence of their doing this: they may take great comfort in it at present, and they will meet with a crown at last. He that is said to *err from the truth* in v. 19 is described as *erring in his way* in v. 20, and we cannot be said to convert any merely by altering their opinions, unless we can bring them to correct and amend their ways. This is conversion — to turn a sinner from the error of his ways, and not to turn him from one party to another, or merely from one notion and way of thinking to another. He who thus converteth a sinner from the error of his ways *shall save a soul from death*. There is a soul in the case; and what is done towards the salvation of the soul shall certainly turn to good account. The soul being the principal part of the man, the saving of that only is mentioned, but it includes the salvation of the whole man: the spirit shall be saved from hell, the body raised from the grave, and both saved from eternal death. And then, by such conversion of heart and life, *a multitude of sins shall be hid*. A most comfortable passage of scripture is this. We learn hence that though our sins are many, even a multitude, yet they may be hid or pardoned; and that when sin is turned from or forsaken it shall be hid, never to appear in judgment against us. Let people contrive to cover or excuse their sin as they will, there is no way effectually and finally to hide it but by forsaking it. Some make the sense of this text to be, that conversion shall *prevent* a multitude of sins; and it is a truth beyond dispute that many sins are prevented in the party converted, many also

may be prevented in others that he may have an influence upon, or may converse with. Upon the whole, how should we lay out ourselves with all possible concern for the conversion of sinners! It will be for the happiness and salvation of the converted; it will prevent much mischief, and the spreading and multiplying of sin in the world; it will be for the glory and honour of God; and it will mightily redound to our comfort and renown in the great day. *Those that turn many to righteousness, and those who help to do so, shall shine as the stars for ever and ever.*