

## Wisdom and Warnings: The Book of James

Careful Words in the Crucible

James 5:9-12

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*Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*

*But above all, my brothers, 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 (James 5:9-12).*

I have heard it said that every Christian wants accountability until they actually get it.

None of us loves people being in our business. And quite frankly, we don't really like the thought of being accountable to anyone but ourselves. That's *part* of why so many people don't believe the gospel. We don't like the thought that there is a God who has standards and will hold us accountable for them someday. But for Christians who realize we have fallen short of these standards and have turned to Jesus for help, we know deep down that accountability is really good for us.

Have you ever quickly clicked off fantasy football or Facebook when you heard your boss coming? But you wouldn't have even tried it if—knowing that might be a temptation—your computer screen was facing the door.

Have you been tempted to become angry with your children, but when you realize you are at church you suddenly become a little bit more patient?

I think that's tendency is one of the reasons they put those flashing signs on the road that show a driver their speed in real-time. It brings us face to face with exactly how fast we are going. And that's good because when our speed is blasted all over the road, most of us slow down.

This isn't hypocrisy. This is recognizing that we do not have the power all by ourselves to do the right thing all the time. As Christians, we have the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and Jesus; we have the local church. But we also still live with indwelling sin. One of the signs of Christian maturity is realizing you need help, and then not trusting yourself *too* much.

Let's put it the way our text does: there are some things you just wouldn't do if you knew Jesus was at your front door ready to go, "knock knock."

Our passage today recognizes that sometimes it is easier to give in to sin than others. In particular, when we are suffering or struggling. We're weak.

Our passage today really starts back at the beginning of Chapter 5 in verses 1:6, where James addresses the wealthy who gained riches by fraud and who use riches to abuse. He reminds them that Jesus is coming again—relatively soon and there will be judgment.

In verses 7-8, James makes a turn. He says, "the reason unbelieving people should repent is the same reason believers should be patient. He says: "I know you are suffering. **But Jesus is coming again and he's coming soon.** Be patient. When he comes, there will be justice, and there will be sweet relief."

In our verses today, 9-12, James continues with this line of thought, but he addresses what we do *while* we wait. *How* do we endure? What does patience look like? In particular, it seems—and this is a huge theme in James—what should our *words* look like? And in all his instruction, he wants us to keep in view that Jesus is coming again, and he's coming soon.

### **Three Ways to Watch our Mouths When We Are Suffering**

#### **1. Guard Against Grumbling**

To begin, let's take a look at verse 9.

*"Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door."*

Let's start with the word that jumps out. What does it mean to grumble?

To grumble is to groan. New Testament scholar Doug Moo says that it's "typically. . .an expression of frustration from the people of God who are suffering oppression or even judgment."<sup>1</sup>

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we see the same word in Exodus 2:23, where the Israelites groaned in their slavery and God heard their cry for help. But here in James 5, Christians were grumbling against each other.

It seems that the Christians James is addressing were turning against one another under the enormous pressure they were facing, as if their Christian brothers and sisters were the reason for their problems!

And we understand this. When we are under pressure it is easier to sin. And we can irrationally blame whatever is around us at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000), 225.

We do this with objects. For instance, there are few things with greater potential to induce anger in me than my line trimmer—my weed wacker. When my trimmer works, I love it. The perimeter of my property is sharp; we're in good shape. But when the line runs out, or when it just breaks off and gets stuck inside, I sometimes wonder if it might not be easier to just throw it away and buy a new one. In the struggle to get the cap off, wind the line, and get the cap back on without the line unwinding again it's suddenly the trimmer's fault, the trimmer manufacturer's fault, and the guy who first had the idea for trimmer's fault.

But we don't just do this with objects; we do this with people as well. And the closer people are to us, the more likely they are to feel our wrath when we are under pressure. We have a tendency to turn on our own team. Why do we think this is?

First, I think it's because we have a comfortability with those close to us. I know my wife isn't going anywhere. I know my kids need me. Therefore, under pressure, I can loosen up a bit in my restraint over my tongue at home. But at work, it's easier to keep things buttoned up because I could get fired.

Second, when we are suffering, we are weak. And in our weakness, we can feel insecure. We don't want more pain. So, we can become suspicious of those close to us precisely because they have the most power to hurt us. In our sinful response to suffering, we can forget who is actually on our team.

This passage deals specifically with the way we turn on other Christians. And I think we can all resonate with this. The past year or so has been hard on the Church in America and on our church. The enormous pressure caused by a number of overlapping trials has created an environment where we have forgotten who is on our team. Under pressure, we become suspicious of one another and therefore feel justified in grumbling against one another. We participate in gossip and make slanderous accusations against one another. We become defensive, and then feel all that much more justified in grumbling again. How do we end this? I know James says stop, but how?

James carefully and clearly reminds us that Jesus is standing right at the door, ready to knock. And when he knocks, he won't wait to be invited in. He is coming as a judge. This verse says that we are not to grumble *so that* we may not be judged. That is a healthy accountability that I need whenever I am tempted to act out of my pain in sin toward others. As one commentator puts it: "The coming Lord is also the judge of the Christian."<sup>2</sup>

Does this make you uncomfortable at all, that Jesus is *our* judge? While it is true that those who God calls out of sin to himself, who respond in faith and repentance to his son and receive the free gift of salvation are God's forever and will never be cast out. . .while faith alone saves, saving faith is never alone. By this point in James ,we should be familiar with this concept. Faith works.

Further, it seems that there will be an accounting of all we have ever done when Jesus returns. That will not be a good day for those who have spent their life rejecting Christ by their actions. But for those of us

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<sup>2</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 185.

who are his, we will be commended for how we spent our time. Look at Matthew 25:21. In the parable of the talents, the master says to the faithful servant: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”

If you are truly a Christian, that is what you want to hear. Because you love him and you want to please him! So let me ask you: When you think back on your week, is there any time you would have been less than thrilled to have Jesus come back? In particular, was there any time you were talking about or typing about another Christian and your heart would have sunk if you had heard *knock knock*?

Next time you are tempted to grumble against your fellow believer under the load of stress, use Jesus’s return as a motivation.

When you think that you are justified in thinking the worst of someone because of your disagreements . . . *knock knock*.

When you begin sharing your wife’s or children’s failings to a friend. . . *knock knock*.

When you think the coast is clear to talk poorly about another church. . . *knock knock*

That thought should stop us dead in our tracks. And that’s why this accountability is a grace to us.

## **2. Remember Faithful Examples**

*As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (James 5:10-11).*

In verses 10-11, James encourages his readers to remember examples of those who did what he is telling them to do well. As examples of suffering and patience, he puts forward two examples: the prophets and Job. He does this to emphasize that those who are steadfast, enduring, patient, and long-suffering, are blessed.

He doesn’t name which prophets he’s referring to, but we can find many examples in the Old Testament of prophets who suffered. Church tradition leads us to believe that Isaiah was sawn in half. Jeremiah was thrown into a well to die and later watched the catastrophic fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel had to lay on one side for three-hundred-ninety days and his other side for forty days—and the whole time ate only bread baked over cow dung. Think about that next time you buy Ezekiel bread.

Hebrews 11:32-38 says,

*And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. . . Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats,*

*destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

How did they respond? They spoke in the name of the Lord. They did not let intense, but momentary suffering distract them from what God called them to say.

How about Job? How was he steadfast? Didn't he complain a lot? Yes, he did.

But here, we see that God sees him primarily as faithful. Job went through unimaginable sorrow losing his family, his wealth and livelihood, his health, even his will to live. But he did not curse God at the suggestion of his wife. And in the end, God still honored him.

*After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has (Job 42:7).*

Job suffered. He even stumbled. But he spoke rightly about God.

Both the prophets and Job were blessed because they remained patient under trial. They hung in there and obeyed. If they did, how much more can we? Look how verse 11 ends: "and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

The "purpose" is probably referring to the purpose God had for Job. God's purpose was to test his servant to show that he was more glorious than anything he took away. And at the end of Job's life, God was compassionate and merciful to Job. He rewarded Job's imperfect, but consistent faithfulness with far more blessing than he started with.

How much more then can we endure when we know the whole ending? We get it all back and much more when Jesus comes again. When we remember that God is a *merciful* judge, then we can't wait to hear *knock knock*. What a relief it will be when he comes to make things right again.

In the meantime, we can learn from those who patiently suffered in Scripture. But we can also look for modern examples. Look around you. Kids, look at the older people in your congregation. Older people, look at people even older than you. Think about Don and Virginia Lassen who were here every week until they physically couldn't. Then "let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear," all the while hoping to hear *knock knock*.

### **3. Maintain Integrity of Speech**

In verse 12, we read the following:

*But above all, my brothers, 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.*

How this relates to what comes before and after isn't totally clear. It seems that it is like a hinge that moves from our section to the conclusion of the letter. The phrase "above all" doesn't mean "most importantly," but more like "in conclusion." But then what comes after it isn't really related. But it does still deal with speech, which puts it most naturally in our section.

James warns against oaths. What is an oath? Wayne Grudem gives this definition: "An oath is an appeal for God's punishment if your statement is untruthful."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, an oath emphasizes the seriousness of what the speaker is saying. That's why people swear oaths before giving testimony in court. It's a way of saying "now you really need to believe me."

So does James condemn these kinds of oaths? Some think so. But I don't think this is what he is getting at. Paul swore oaths in 2 Corinthians 1:23 and Romans 1:9-10. Jesus swore an oath in Matthew 26:63-64. God swore an oath in Hebrew 6:13-18. I think what James is going after is integrity of speech.

James 5:12 almost mirrors Jesus's teaching on oaths in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). From that, and a later passage in Matthew, we learn that people were so used to untrustworthy speech that they would swear oaths to try to get people to trust them. Even then, however, they had a system for weaseling out of an oath. By this system, if someone swore by the temple, it didn't count. But if they swore by the gold of the temple, it did. It would be like us saying, "I said I would be there, but I didn't say 'I promise.'"

We are to be people of our word who have no need to reinforce our credibility. When we say we're going to do something, we do it. When we say we won't, we don't. And if we believe this is tied to the rest of our passage today, we might unlock something else.

It's possible that *suffering* brought with it a greater temptation to compromise integrity of speech. Maybe you've seen this. It is way easier to twist the details when there are greater consequences. When you are hurt, it can be tempting to set up our opponent's arguments as straw men, poor versions of their actual arguments that are easy to knock down. I think this extends even into actually meaning that we let our yes be yes and our no be no. It's easy to justify our flakiness, our breaking of commitments, when we feel overwhelmed with life.

And this is why James reminds us of what is really hard to hear. We maintain integrity of speech *so that* we do not fall under condemnation. Whew! But there's that accountability again. It's good for us. Life is hard. It can be easy to cheat under pressure. But when we're tempted to crumble, remember, what would happen if. . . *knock knock*.

When Jesus comes, we want to be ready. Just like he stood at the door in James's time, he stands at the door now. He is coming. And compared to all of eternity, it is soon. And we should feel that holy pressure. We want to be excited when he returns. If we are believers, it will be a relief. We are his forever, and no matter how imperfect we have been he keeps us and doesn't let us go. But we should

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 298.

let his second coming be a healthy motivation to be careful with our mouths, especially when we are suffering and it is so easy not to. We do this so that we can meet him with open arms. Likewise, James gives us some very clear warnings. If Jesus's second coming doesn't stir something in you to pursue holiness; if you call yourself a Christian—or even if you don't—and you give no thought to his second coming and continue to live like everyone else, you should be concerned by these warnings. Guys, Jesus is coming again. And that thought should make us relieved, but also should make us tremble.

Sometimes the simplest way to say it is the best. If you know this song, would you sing it with me?

*O be careful little eyes, what you see,*

*O be careful little eyes, what you see,*

*For the Father up above is looking down in love,*

*So be careful little eyes what you see.*

*O be careful little ears, what you hear.*

*O be careful little ears, what you hear.*

*For the Father up above is looking down in love,*

*O be careful little ears, what you hear.*

*O be careful little mouth, what you say.*

*O be careful little mouth, what you say.*

*For the Father up above is looking down in love,*

*O be careful little mouth, what you say*

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