

Today we bring to a close the series we've been in the last couple months going through the book of James. If you've been with us each week, James is filled with exhortations to put our faith into action...to put our faith to work. And then we come to this final passage which exhorts us to be patient, stand firm, and pray. I don't know about you, but when I first read this section I thought, "Did I accidentally turn to Philipians?" "Are we still in James?" I mean, this conclusion just doesn't seem to quite fit with the rest of the message that is so focused on taking action. So what's going on? Let's dive in...

James encourages us in verse 7 to be patient. **In the book of Galatians, Paul lists patience as one of the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, *patience*, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).** Out of all of them, patience is the one that Christians probably pray the least to have – because who wants to have the opportunities to be patient, right?

There was once a man who observed a woman in the grocery store with a three-year old girl strapped into the shopping cart. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her "no." The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly, "Now Ellen, we just have half of the aisles left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be long." He passed the mother again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry. The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll be checking out."

The man again happened to be behind the pair at the check-out, where the little girl immediately began to clamor for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today. The mother patiently said, "Ellen, we'll be through this check-out stand in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap." The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. "I

couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen..." The mother broke in, "My little girl's name is Tammy... I'm Ellen."ⁱ

It's actually a great story of what true patience is and is not. **Patience is not just the ability to wait. It's the ability to wait and maintain a good attitude while waiting.** Tammy and Ellen both have to wait – wait to get through the store, wait for a nap, wait for a treat. They're both waiting. One we would describe as patient. The other we would describe as impatient. It's the attitude that's the difference. This is how James is telling us to be.

Now, in particular, James writes to be patient until the Lord's coming. This is in reference to Jesus' return, his second coming. We are all waiting for that, and given the way things have been the last couple months, I think we'd all be just fine if he came tomorrow. But this gives us a good window into what patience is, because clearly it's *not* sitting around doing nothing. All that he has written before about living out our faith, doing good deeds, putting our faith to work, and so forth is a part of this. Patience is not passive waiting.

If you want further evidence about the nature of Biblical patience, he writes in verse 7 that it's like a farmer who waits for his crops. No farmer is just sitting around twiddling their thumbs waiting for their crops. There's always work to do. And then he also writes in verse 8, **"Be patient and stand firm" (James 5:8)**. The Greek word for "stand firm" is "stay-reedzo" and it means "to make firm, or set firmly or strengthen." It's used 14 times in the New Testament and is usually translated as "make strong" or "strengthen." So it's not passively standing firm. It's an active thing. It's about staying strong and being strengthened – in other words, getting stronger – even as you are patient.

And this makes sense. **Patience requires strength. To maintain a good attitude while waiting takes strength.** James gives an example, pointing his readers to the prophets of the Old Testament, where he also brings in the quality of perseverance, specifically mentioning Job. It's a reminder that perseverance is needed in order to remain patient. So what these first verses are showing is the connection between patience, steadfastness, and perseverance.

Perhaps the greatest example of this in recent memory is Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He had incredible patience that was marked not by sitting around, but rather was marked by his strength and perseverance. He had a strength about him that helped him stay focused on the task at hand and patience even in the midst of opposition. And it certainly helped that he was a man whose mission for racial equality and reconciliation was driven by his relationship with Jesus. Dr. King wasn't a perfect man, but Jesus was at the heart of his mission. Jesus was the foundation. And so he was constantly strengthened and given patience as he stood up against the powers of injustice and darkness, much as Jesus did.

Then James moves to prayer. **He asks this question in verse 13, “Is anyone among you in trouble?”** This word for “trouble” here means “suffering hardships, enduring evil or afflictions.” Paul uses it twice in 2 Timothy when he writes of suffering and enduring hardship for the sake of the gospel. So there's a spiritual flavor to this hardship or trouble. That's not to dismiss the physical sense of trouble or hardship...but this hardship or trouble has a spiritual root to it. That there is some kind of sin – either in the individual or in other people – that is working against that person, and that person is in trouble because of it.

I learned something this week about this passage that connects to this. In verse 14 he writes, “Is anyone among you sick?” And he says in that instance to gather the elders, pray for that person, anoint him or her with oil in the name of the Lord. Then he writes in verse 15 that the prayer offered in faith will make the “sick” person well. **The word for “sick” in verse 14 (astheneo) is not the same word he uses in 15 (kamno).** In 14 he uses the word astheneo. It's a medical sickness – to be weak, not feeling well, and so forth. It's the word that's used in the gospels when we read of Jesus healing the sick, or that an individual was sick and brought to Jesus.

Then in verse 15 it's a different word. The root word here is “Kamno.” It's only used two other times in Scripture – in Hebrews 12:3 and Revelation 2:3. Hebrews 12:3 reads: “Consider him [Jesus] who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary (kamno) and lose heart.

Revelation 2:3 reads, “You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary (kamno).” In both of these instances, it’s not a physical illness being talked about – like coronavirus or chicken pox; it’s a spiritual condition that seeks to undermine us spiritually. The writers of Hebrews and Revelation are encouraging their readers to persevere and stand strong against forces of evil and sin.

This sheds light for us on our James passage. **Verse 15 is saying that the one who has grown weary, the one who has maybe struggled with the burden of sin – either their own or someone else’s – the one who endures hardships on behalf of Jesus... that person will be made well.** And so in being healed, James is saying that they will be strengthened and encouraged spiritually and in living out their faith; their souls will be nourished. They will be strengthened and be able to persevere to do the good deeds God puts before them.

And the last few words of verse 15 of James actually give us this same context of our spiritual health. He writes, **“The prayer offered in faith will make the sick (kamno) person well; the Lord will raise them up. *If they have sinned, they will be forgiven*” (James 5:15).** “If they have sinned.” It confirms the spiritual nature that he’s writing of. We do pray for those who are physically ill – he says so in verse 14 – but the larger context beginning in verse 13 where the trouble we find ourselves in has spiritual roots...the context is *spiritual* sickness, it’s the person who has sin in their life. And he’s saying that God will heal that person. God restores us, God will forgive them.

Then in verse 16 he stays in this place of spiritual health. He tells them to confess their sins to one another and pray for each other. It’s still spiritual health. So the bulk of these verses on prayer here are focused on prayer in regards to sin, so that the healing of our souls and our spirits would take place. And it’s not that we control God with our prayers. It is a way for us to acknowledge our own sins, and then live into the forgiveness that God offers.

And after giving the example of Elijah praying in verses 17 and 18, he returns to the theme of prayer and spiritual health when he writes, **“My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and**

someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:19-20). So he concludes on this spiritual health theme, as he has since the question back in verse 13 about being in trouble, spiritually.

Why would he focus on this spiritual health here at the end of a letter that focuses on doing the right thing? Why admonish them to pray and confess? **The reason is that if our spiritual health isn't good – if sin is in the way – it keeps us from living out what the whole rest of the letter is all about!** Sin divides and disrupts. It causes us to lose heart so we aren't properly patient. Sin causes us to act like a 3-year old when true patience is needed. It robs us strength and perseverance. And it gets in the way of living out our faith. It makes our faith dead so we won't do the good we know we ought to do, so we won't do the good deeds that God puts before us. Sin makes us complacent and lazy. Karl Barth, the great German theologian who along with others spoke and wrote against Hitler and agenda, said that the chief sin of people is “slothfulness.” So really, James is concluding with the most important thing, because if we can't get this part right – if we don't confess our sin – we won't get any of the rest of the letter right, either, and slothfulness will set in. To connect it to verses 7-12: **If we don't pray and confess and get our spiritual health right, we will fall into to an unbiblical patience, that has no strength and doesn't persevere.**

So, let me ask you a question, and I ask this of myself as well: Is there something in your life that needs to be confessed? As we come to the conclusion of our time in James, where we have been hit over and over with the theme of living out your faith...putting your faith into action...letting your faith lead you to do good deeds...doing the good we know we ought to do...In light of all that James has written along those lines: **Is there something that is in the way of your own spiritual health that prevents you from living out your faith...and needs to be humbly acknowledged and confessed?** Is there something that keeps you from doing the good you know you ought to do?

For me, the thing that has been on my heart in the last couple weeks is my

own pride. I might not have identified it as pride previously, but I've come to realize that's exactly what it is, because my pride blinded me to my own biases and assumptions. My pride told me, "I've never benefited from my skin color. We all are equally free. Everyone has the same opportunity to succeed in life – I haven't had anything special handed to me." My pride told me that. It wasn't an overt pride, it was a pride born out of ignorance, of not really examining myself and my upbringing and the world around me.

For example, it was a pride that justified my own perks in life by downgrading them because there were other kids in my high school graduating class who had a lot of perks and advantages and connections that I didn't have...so I dismissed all the advantages I *did* have. **It was a pride that said, "If someone is materially lacking or doesn't have a similar education to me, that they must have done something, or not done something, to be in that place."** They didn't work hard, didn't study hard, didn't put themselves out there, or made dumb decisions. And sometimes that's true. People of all skin colors squander wealth and other resources or advantages given to them through poor decisions or foolishness or laziness all the time. **But I've become aware that some people just don't have the same start in life that a lot of us (myself included) were born with and take for granted...and it goes back generations.**

For instance, it never occurred to me until recently, that when Black people were granted freedom in 1865, that they then had to buy their own land, build a home, acquire possessions that they needed, and so forth...and for most all of them they had to do all of that from scratch, with no financial help. On History.com I read an article last week that was about a book titled, "Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo'." It is an interview from the 1930's with a man named Cudjo Lewis, **(Pictures)** who was the last man known to be alive who came to America on a slave ship. In it, he tells of being taken away from his homeland against his will, and tells of his life as a slave and then into his freedom after the Civil War. He tells of his anger that when he was set free – and he remembers when the union soldiers stopped by to convey the news – that they weren't given anything to help them get started. No "forty acres and a mule" as he puts it. So thirty-two of them saved up to buy a plot of land to share amongst themselves near Mobile, Alabama,

and they called it “Africatown.”

So what I’ve come to realize is that: **This disadvantage then gets passed on to the next generation and the next generation.** It’s as if Cudjo and so many others like him started a relay race, where the majority of the other contestants – who essentially all had white skin – all had a significant head start that keeps getting passed on to the rest of the relay race competitors. And over time, there have been other advantages handed off to other competitors, too – such as the right to vote, differing educational standards, and so forth. I just had never thought about how all of that impacted me or anyone else. My pride kept me blind to it, and kept me from seeing that there is still a problem in our nation today when it comes to racial equality, with roots that go back generations and generations.

Because of my ignorance, I assumed there wasn’t a problem – or that it wasn’t a problem I should help solve in any way. That was my pride talking. So for me, this is a sin that I’ve been praying about and confessing as James admonishes us to. And it’s leading me to then put my faith into action with a show of solidarity today on NE 85th Street, simply being out there again as I was a couple weeks ago. It’s *something* I can do to put my faith into action, as James continually admonishes us to, and as Jesus modeled throughout his life. I know this is a complex issue, but complexity shouldn’t scare us into a lack of action. **Maybe God has put other things on your heart that are preventing you from doing the good deeds he’s calling you to do.** (Whether those deeds are in regards to racial equity or something else.) Perhaps there’s some spiritually unhealthy thing in your life that’s different than mine. Whatever those things are, or whatever it is, take James’ concluding message to heart: confess it, spend time in prayer, get into a healthier and holier place with God as he forgives you and his spirit moves in you. Then God will work through you in powerful, life-changing ways – maybe even culture-changing and world changing ways! – as you patiently live out your faith, showing it by your good deeds, so that one day, when Jesus does return, “every knee would bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord” (Philippians 2:10-11) Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ This story is pretty readily available on-line, which is where I found it.