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RESPONDING RIGHTLY WHEN YOU'RE WRONGED

James 5:7-9

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James Lesson 20

Responding Rightly When You're Wronged James 5:7-9

One of the most important lessons to learn as a Christian is how to respond rightly when you are wronged. Count on it—you *will* be wronged! For some strange reason, newer Christians often have the notion that God will protect them from all wrongs. Everything seems to be going so well since they trusted in Christ. They're experiencing newfound joy and peace. Solutions to difficult problems seem to be coming together. It's great to be a Christian!

Then, wham! Some difficult trial hits them broadside. They're falsely accused at work and even get fired. The person who lied about them gets promoted. It's just not fair! Or, a family member betrays them and spreads vicious gossip to other family members. Or, someone at church that they looked up to as an example disappoints them. They're shocked, angered, and confused. They wonder, "If someone like that failed, can I trust anyone?"

In our text, James is showing us how to respond rightly when we're wronged. The section runs from 5:7-11, but we will break it into two sections for sake of time. It's linked to James' blast against the godless rich (5:1-6) by "therefore." The connection is, "If you as a Christian have been badly wronged, be patient! The Lord will return soon, and when He comes, He will righteously judge every person. He will vindicate you. But, be careful, because He will judge you, too!" He's saying,

When you are wronged, wait patiently on the Lord, who is coming soon righteously to judge every person.

James' theme in this section is easy to discern, because he repeats certain words or concepts. He commands (5:7), "Be patient" and then illustrates it with the patient farmer (5:7). Again, he commands (5:8), "You too be patient." In 5:10, he mentions again the patience of the prophets, who suffered for speaking in the name of the Lord. Coupled with patience is "endurance," which he mentions twice in connection with Job's sufferings (5:11).

Another theme is the near coming of the Lord. He mentions it in verses 7, 8, and 9. The overall context has to do with the righteous who are suffering, not due to any fault of their own (5:6, 10, 11). They must keep doing the will of God, waiting for Him to come and judge the wicked and reward the righteous. While they wait, they must cultivate this godly virtue of patience.

1. When unbelievers wrongly take advantage of you, keep working for the Lord while you wait patiently for Him to come as the righteous Judge (5:7-8).

These verses teach us four things about patience:

- A. Patience requires repeated exhortations and efforts.

My college physics professor often told us his theory of teaching. He would say, "I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. Then I'll tell you. Then I'll tell you what I told you. Then, I'll review!" James does that here. He commands, "Be patient!" Then he gives you an illustration of the patient farmer. Then he repeats the command, "Be patient." Then he goes on to give two more illustrations of patient endurance: the prophets and Job (5:10-11).

We can all identify with the guy who prayed, "Lord, give me patience—right now!" I don't need patience when things are going smoothly, but when things go wrong, I need it all at once. So I can't practice patience when things are going well, because it's easy to be patient then. But when things start bugging me, I can't practice patience, because I'm already frustrated and impatient!

There is no crash course to cultivating this virtue. The Greek word is a compound of two words literally meaning, "long-tempered." If you have a short fuse, you're not patient. To step on everyone's toes (including my own!), if you're easily frustrated with other "stupid" drivers, you're not patient. If you're quick to find fault with others' imperfections, you're not patient. If you snap at your kids over minor, childish things, you're not patient.

J. B. Lightfoot wrote (*Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* [Zondervan], p. 140), "... *makrothumia* ["patience"] is the self-restraint which does not hastily retaliate a wrong." The word does not occur in classical Greek and only rarely in later Greek. It describes a distinctively Christian virtue, which was not a virtue at all to the Greeks. For them, it was a virtue *not* to tolerate any insult

or injury without taking vengeance. For Christians, the virtue was to be able to take revenge, but to refuse to do so (William Barclay, *New Testament Words* [Westminster Press], pp. 196, 197).

Biblical patience is tolerant of the imperfections, faults, and differences in others. It gives the other person time to change and room to make some mistakes in the process. Paul lists patience as the first quality that describes love (1 Cor. 13:4). If you're not patient, you're not loving! It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Like all fruit, it takes time and effort to cultivate.

Significantly, patience is a quality of God Himself. Peter, when writing about the delay in the Lord's return to judge the wicked, explained (2 Pet. 3:9), "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (See also, Rom. 2:4; 1 Pet. 3:20.) If God were not patient, He would have wiped every sinner off the face of the earth centuries ago! William Barclay applies this (*ibid.*, p. 198), "The great obligation which rests on the Christian is just this—he must be as patient with his fellow-men as God has been with him." So put it on your prayer list (for yourself, *not* for your mate!), and work at developing patience.

B. Patience requires trust in the Lord's promise of His coming.

James' readers were being wronged by the rich (5:6). Whether he means that some were literally being murdered, or is just speaking figuratively, they were the object of serious injustices. James tells them to be patient "until the coming of the Lord," which was near (5:7, 8).

A critic may retort, "What kind of comfort is that? That's just 'pie in the sky when you die!'" I grant this. You're going to die. Would you like pie with that, or no pie? The Christian faith makes absolutely no sense unless what God says about eternity is true. That's why Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:19), "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied."

"The New Testament contains over 300 references to Christ's return—one of every thirteen verses" (Kent Hughes, *James, Faith that Works* [Crossway Books], p. 222)! If He isn't coming back to judge the living and the dead, then Paul says (1 Cor. 15:32b), "...

let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Live for the most pleasure you can squeeze out of every fleeting day. But, if He is coming as the righteous Judge, then, "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

But still, some critics insist, the New Testament writers and even Jesus Himself were wrong with regard to the timing of His return. When Jesus said that that generation would not pass away until He returned (Mark 13:30), or when James (5:8) said, "the coming of the Lord is near," they meant well. But, as William Barclay flatly states (*The Letters of James and Peter* [Westminster Press], p. 122), "It so happened that the early church was mistaken. Jesus did not return within a generation." Whew!

How should we respond to this? Douglas Moo explains that we must understand the word "near" in the appropriate temporal framework, namely, salvation history. As we saw last week, the "last days" refers to the entire period between Christ's ascension and His second coming. Moo writes (*The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 224),

But—and here is the crucial point—the length of this age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent."

So we should live every day with the realization that Jesus could come at any time. Trusting in the Lord's promise of His coming will give you patience to endure wrong treatment, knowing that He will right every wrong.

C. Patience requires dealing with your heart before God.

In addition to repeating, "be patient," James (5:8) adds, "Strengthen your hearts." Patience is a matter of our heart attitude before God. The verb, strengthen is used elsewhere in the sense of being spiritually firm or established (Luke 22:32; Rom. 1:11; 16:25; 1 Thess. 3:3, 13; 2 Thess. 2:17; 3:3; 1 Pet. 5:10 ["confirm"]; 2 Pet. 1:12; Rev. 3:2). Moo explains (p. 223), "What is commanded, then, is firm adherence to the faith in the midst of temptations and trials.

As they wait patiently for their Lord to return, believers need to fortify themselves for the struggle against sin and with difficult circumstances.”

James’ teaching here raises an important practical matter: Is it wrong to defend yourself or your property when unscrupulous people try to take advantage of you? Is he saying that you are just to be passively patient and let them run over you? Or, is it permissible to take action and to stand up for your rights?

First, Scripture clearly teaches that it is wrong to take personal vengeance. As Paul says (Rom. 12:19), “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

Second, it is important to confront any selfishness or greed in your heart before you take any action. Any action motivated by greed, vengeance, or other selfish reasons is wrong.

Third, if it is a professing Christian that is trying to take advantage of you, the first attempts to deal with the problem should be through the church. Paul chastises the Corinthians because brother was taking brother to court, when they should have resolved matters within the church (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If the professing Christian refuses to submit to the church leaders, then I think that a believer is free to use the legal system for protection. God has ordained civil government to bring punishment on the one who does wrong and to protect the innocent (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 3:14).

In our text, James (5:10) tells us to imitate the prophets. They often spoke out boldly against evil and social injustice (such as James has just done in 5:1-6), sometimes when that evil was directed at themselves (2 Kings 1:9-12; 2:23-24; Jer. 28:10-17). So we are not required to be passive doormats to unscrupulous, evil people. But we are required to deal with our hearts, to make sure that our focus is properly on the coming of the Lord and eternity.

D. Patience requires seeing what God is doing over the long haul and working diligently, while trusting Him for results.

In typical fashion, James (5:7) uses an illustration from nature, that of the farmer waiting patiently for his crop. In Israel, the farmers would plow and sow their seed in autumn. The early rains came in the fall. The late rains came in the spring, and both were neces-

sary for a fruitful harvest. Interestingly, every Old Testament reference to the early and late rains “occurs in a context affirming the faithfulness of the Lord” (Moo, p. 223, lists Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24; Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23; Zech. 10:1). James’ readers would have made this connection, which fits in with the theme here of patiently waiting on the Lord, who is always faithful to those who trust in Him. James’ analogy of the farmer has three implications with regard to patiently waiting on the Lord:

- (1) God’s purposes are worked out over long periods of time.

No farmer sows his seed and goes out a week later expecting to see the mature crop. He knows that it takes time. If he flew into a rage because the crop wasn’t ready that soon, or if he grew discouraged and said, “I’m giving up farming because it takes too long,” we would say, “He’s a foolish farmer.” Farming is a slow process, but if the farmer works at it and if God sends the proper rain, eventually it yields a harvest.

I meet so many Christians who have the short view of things. They expect instant results. Pastors see “successful” churches that are growing by phenomenal rates, and they think that they’re not successful if their churches aren’t seeing similar results. But genuine spiritual fruit is not a quick process.

On a personal level, Paul tells us to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). Just as the athlete disciplines himself for his event, so we are to discipline ourselves for godliness. But we don’t like that analogy, because it implies hard work and a long-range approach. No athlete works out for a week or even a month and gets in the Olympics! It requires many years of daily training, often when the athlete would rather be doing something else. Spiritually, we’d rather have a quick fix. Isn’t there a seminar I can go to or an experience that I can have that will give me victory over sin and develop godly character qualities in my life? No, it requires daily discipline for the rest of your life!

James’ readers were engaged in the struggle to be holy people. They were seeking to grow in their understanding of the Scriptures and to be obedient. But they saw the ungodly prospering. In fact, these prosperous evil people were taking advantage of the poor

Christians. So, many of them were losing sight of the harvest at the end of the age. They were wondering, is it worth it to follow the Lord if it means hardship, self-denial, and suffering? James is saying, "Yes, it's definitely worth it, because at the return of Christ, He will reward you and punish the wicked. Wait for the harvest!"

- (2) Although we must work, the harvest depends on God giving the needed blessing.

The farmer illustration implies several things. For one, the farmer plowed the ground, prepared it, and planted the seed, which always takes faith. The farmer has to take some of the grain that he has stored up for food, cast it into the ground where it dies, and wait, hope, and pray for it to sprout and produce a crop the next year. While he's waiting on that crop, the farmer does not sit around doing nothing. He's fertilizing it, irrigating it, preparing his barns for the harvest, and many other duties. If a farmer did not plow and sow the seed, he would be crazy to anticipate a bountiful crop the next year. He has to work with a view to the harvest.

At the same time, the farmer depends on God to send the proper rains at the proper time, and in the right amounts. Not enough rain and the seed won't sprout. Too much rain and floods will ruin the crop. If God doesn't give the increase, there will not be a fruitful harvest.

Spiritually, it is the same. If godliness is the *fruit* of the Spirit, then we must sow to the Spirit (Gal. 5:22; 6:7-8). If you do not use the means that God has ordained—reading and meditating on His Word, prayer, obedience, worship, gathering with God's people regularly, etc.—you would be foolish to expect a crop of godliness in your life. Charles Simeon has a helpful sermon on this text (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], XX:105), in which he comments with regard to the Christian that he "has heaven in view, and that he is preparing for a future harvest."

Can you say that about your own life? Do you live with heaven in view? Are you preparing for a future spiritual harvest? Maybe you're thinking, "Heaven seems so far away. Why should I work hard and discipline myself and deny myself now for something that far away?"

- (3) The crop is worth waiting for.

James (5:7) calls the harvest “the precious produce of the soil.” The crop is precious because the farmer has labored long and hard for it and his family and he depend on it for life itself.

In the same way, our final salvation, when God will right all wrongs and reward those who have suffered and labored for His harvest, will be a precious thing. But, we have to wait until the coming of the Lord to reap the full benefits of His salvation. Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], VI:996) says, “Consider him that waits for a crop of corn; and will not you wait for a crown of glory?” As Paul put it, when considering all of his trials for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:17), “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.”

So James' main point is, when unbelievers wrongly take advantage of you, keep working for the Lord while you patiently wait on Him to come as the righteous Judge. But, in verse 9 he adds,

2. When fellow believers wrong you, wait patiently for the coming righteous Judge, remembering that He will judge you, too (5:9)!

At first glance, verse 9 doesn't seem to fit into the context. It seems that James should have put it in back in 4:11, when he talked about not judging one another. But a moment's reflection reveals why he put it here. When you're under pressure from the outside (5:1-8), it's easy to take out your frustrations on those who are closest to you, even though they're not the source of your problems. If you have a difficult, ungodly boss who harasses you, it's easy to snap at your wife or kids over minor issues, even though they're not the cause of your irritation.

The Greek word translated “complain” means, literally, to groan. Donald Burdick explains (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 12:202) “It speaks of inner distress more than open complaint. What is forbidden is not the loud and bitter denunciation of others but the unexpressed feeling of bitterness or the smothered resentment that may express itself in a groan or a sigh.” So maybe you restrain yourself from saying something caustic or exploding in anger, but you roll your eyes and shake your head in derision. Your body language communicates your disap-

proval of the other person. James says, "Don't do that!" As Warren Wiersbe says (*Be Mature* [Victor Books], p. 156), "If we start using the sickles on each other, we will miss the harvest!"

James says, "Before you groan against your brother, remember that the same Lord who will judge him will judge you, too!" Christians will not come into judgment for salvation (John 5:24), but we will be judged for rewards (2 Cor. 5:10). That fact should cause us to fear God and strive against our sin (1 Cor. 3:12-17). Also, remember that in grumbling against someone else, you're ultimately grumbling against the Lord, who sovereignly put that person into your life at that point in time. Thus the Bible prohibits all grumbling, because it ultimately is grumbling against the Lord Himself (Phil. 2:15; 1 Cor. 10:10).

Conclusion

If you think that you're patient, consider this story. During the late 1500's, Dr. Thomas Cooper edited a learned dictionary with the addition of 33,000 words, and many other improvements. He had already been eight years in collecting materials for his edition when his wife, who was a rather difficult woman to live with, went into his study one day while he was gone and burned all of his notes. She said that she feared he would kill himself with study!

The doctor returned home, saw the destruction, and asked who had done it. His wife boldly asserted that it was the work of her hands. The patient man heaved a deep sigh and said, "Oh, Dinah, Dinah, thou hast given a world of trouble!" Then he quietly sat down to another eight years of hard labor, to replace the notes that she had destroyed (*Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, by Paul Tan [Assurance Publishers], #2350). Okay, maybe he shouldn't have sighed! But I've got a long ways to go to be as patient as he was!

When you're wronged, whether by a believer or an unbeliever, wait patiently on the Lord, who will soon return and judge every person. As the 19th century preacher, A. B. Simpson observed, in heaven you won't have anything or anyone to try you, so you won't need patience there. It is a fruit of the Spirit for here and now. To respond rightly when you're wronged, patiently wait for the Lord.

Application Questions

1. How can we know when to patiently endure wrong treatment and when to confront the wrongdoer in love?
2. How can we instill in our daily focus the Lord's coming? What practical impact should it have on our lives?
3. Is it ever right for a Christian to sue another Christian? What if the other person is wrongfully taking your life savings?
4. Is it wrong to labor for eternal rewards? Why/why not? Support your answer with Scripture (use a concordance).

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