

A Sad, Sad Situation

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[0 : 00] Wonderful to see you tonight, folks. Thank you so much, Hannah, for reading and for AI for praying for us as we set into this passage. I just think you'll agree this is a non-controversial passage.

I'm sure you'll see as we've read it there. But if we've got years to listen tonight, this is a fantastic passage. It will challenge us, it will confront us, and I hope it will encourage us as well. So tune in if you can tonight.

We'll bring this home, this whole series. We've been in this letter of James for a while. Let's finish it. Together as we get into chapter 5 then. So we're definitely going to need our Bibles tonight.

So please make every effort to get God's Word in front of you. We'll be in James chapter 5. Heads up, we'll also be in 1 Kings chapter 16 and 17.

And 18 as well, I think. You might want to turn there. Just as we're setting off tonight. We'll get to it in maybe 15 or so minutes time. But there's just a heads up so you're not frantically looking for 1 Kings at that point in the sermon.

[1 : 02] But, okay, let me level with you. Here is the song that has been in my head over the last couple of weeks of being James chapter 5. See if you recognise it.

Okay, here's the lyrics go like this. So sad. So sad. And see if you can get the song right. So sad. So sad. It's a sad, sad situation.

And it's getting more and more absurd. So sad. So sad. Why can't we just talk it over? Sorry seems to be, sorry seems to be the hardest word.

Okay, yeah. Hardest word. Vintage Elton John wasn't it back in the day if you remember it. If you're my age, you remember there was a dodgy boy band called Blue that sang a cover of it back in the 90s.

The less said about that, the better. But there's the song that's been in my head all week. I wish I had something more spiritual for you, but I don't. It's just how my brain works. But it's a sad, sad situation. Why have those words been in my head all week?

[2 : 02] Because those words could have easily been penned by James as he thinks about the Christians that he's writing to. Okay. Now if James was a TV show, again this is how my mind works.

James was a TV show, this letter, this would be called Christians Behaving Badly. Right. This would be world's deadliest Christians. This would be church uncut.

Now if you remember this way back at the start, we thought about the context of this letter who he's writing to. These people, as a church, are all over the shop. All the way through this letter, James has exposed the visible symptoms of their life together.

And man alive is ugly. Okay. If you've been tracking with us, we've seen this over the weeks. We've seen quarrels. We've seen fights, fisty cuffs. We've seen disputes. We've seen conflicts.

And we've seen rage. And if this church had a website, right, and it was honest, you wouldn't see people hugging one another on the front page. You would see people having each other in a headlock on the front page, wouldn't you?

[3 : 01] This is what we've seen is going on in this church. Now it was Albert Einstein, I think, who said famously, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

You heard that quote? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Here's what I want us to notice is that James the pastor has not just said, be better.

Right? I can tell you for free as a parent, that never works. Okay? Just saying, be better. Because if James had just said that, if this book was all about morals, then how long do you think that would have lasted?

We know our own hearts well enough to know, don't we, how long that would have lasted. It wouldn't have lasted long. But James' pastoral heart shines through in this letter. He is not content simply with labeling and identifying the symptoms that he wants them to see. He goes way deeper than that. Okay? He's got them to think about why these things are happening. [4 : 01] It's a great question in our own lives when we see things. Know my own heart. Lord, asking me often when I'm angry, why are you angry? He says it to Cain, doesn't he?

Genesis 4. Why are you angry? Chapter 4, verse 1. Have you got James there? Give you an example of this. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Why? Why does this stuff happen in your hearts? What's going on? Don't they come from the desires that battle within you? Do you see it? So this is not search for the hero inside yourself. This is be honest about the Frankenstein inside yourself. That's what he's gone for, isn't it? The problem is a heart problem. So he's gone from the symptoms to the heart. He's talked about the pride and the jealousy and the envy and the rage which goes on in their lives. What does he encourage?

[5 : 01] He encourages them to know who God is. That's the solution, isn't it? To know who this God is and to know and to savour the gospel of his free grace.

So if anyone's got a heart transplant going on, if these are the things that are going on in their hearts, pride, jealousy, envy, rage, what he wants to be going on in their hearts. And this can only happen by grace.

The fruit of the Spirit. Some of the words that he's used. Grace. Humility. Meekness. Prayer. Prayer.

And prayer is everywhere in this letter, particularly the beginning, the middle and the end. And patience. It's only going to come by God's work of grace through his indwelling Spirit.

As you cast yourselves upon the Lord. But James goes even deeper than that. What has been the big issue that's been right at the heart of everything that James has been saying is this issue of double-mindedness.

[6 : 09] Double-mindedness. Now let me just try and illustrate again. So what I've been thinking of this week. What's double-mindedness? Now if you've ever been to a sports event, right? You get these at rugby grounds all the time. Football grounds as well.

People outside the grounds and they're selling 50-50 scarves. You ever seen that before? 50-50 scarves. Right? See when I was growing up going to football games, that was not a thing. Okay? A 50-50 scarf. If you'd ever done that, I don't think you would have made it out to tell the tale. Okay? A 50-50 scarf. Half of the scarf that you've got, half is for one team. And half is for the other team.

Blue and red. Blue and green. Whatever colours you want of the two teams that are playing. One team scores a goal, you're cheering. The other team scores a goal, you're cheering. How does that work? This doesn't work.

And that's these people. With a 50-50 scarves. Right? They're trying to love the world and they're trying to love God. And they think that they can do both at the same time. Track with me.

[7 : 06] Okay? Chapter 1, verse 7. Such a person. It's from a prayer. Such a person is double-minded. There's a phrase. Double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Chapter 4, verse 4. Just showing you a few of these. He calls them. See it? You adulterous people. Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?

So you cannot be holding up the 50-50 scarf in the Christian life. Okay? So Jesus says, isn't it? You can't serve two masters. This doesn't work. You'll love the one and hate the other.

Or you'll hate the other and love the other one. Right? But what is James' pastoral heart then? It's that these people who he knows and who he loves would rededicate themselves wholly to the Lord. And be restored to one another. Okay? And so here's what I want to suggest as we make our way through this passage.

[8 : 13] With all its rabbit holes, with all its peculiarities, and potentially all its speculations. Here's what I want to suggest. That these are not some random verses about healing that have come out of nowhere.

And he's tagged on to the end of his letter to cover his bases. Just in case at some point in the future these prove useful. What I'm suggesting is that James is very much thinking about the sad, sad situation.

To these Christians behaving badly. And he's not changed his tune when it comes to the thrust of the issue of double-mindedness.

Right? That 50-50 scarf. Just keep that in your mind. That's what he's going after. Now let's just deal with Dumbo. Okay? Watch Dumbo with the kids just there. Okay?

Deal with Dumbo. The elephant in the room. The Dumbo. Right? Let's deal with Dumbo. Come with me to verse 15 of chapter 5. Here's probably the question you're asking. All of us has read this through. James writes, okay?

[9 : 18] And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. And the Lord will raise them up. Now what is that all about? Right? What is that all about?

Now there's a verse that at its best is potentially confusing. And I think at its worst is potentially open to horrendous abuse. And it's a verse that's loved by faith healers all over the world.

Remember my time in Malawi. This guy called TB Joshua. Huge in Nigeria. They all... Everyone was talking about him. All on the radios as you walked around people's houses. This guy was into faith healing.

It's horrendous using this verse for that. Because if you take it that way, then you run into all sorts of thorny questions, do you not? What does it mean to be healed?

What level of healing can I expect? What if I'm not healed? What counts as a healing? How much faith do I need? What does my faith need to be in? It's confusing.

[10 : 18] But also it's potentially hugely psychologically, spiritually, and maybe even physically damaging for us to take it that way. Of course, friends, even someone is ill in our church.

We pray. Of course we pray. Right? We do it every single Sunday. We'll be doing it tomorrow night and Monday. People in our church family who are sick. We will pray for them. Why will we pray for them?

Because we love them. Right? We love one another. When part of the body is hurting, we are there in presence. But we are there in prayer. Because we love one another.

We're praying more, aren't we, than just that they'll get physically better. We're praying that God's presence would be with them. That they would know Jesus as their all-in-all, as we were singing just there, in their situation. And that the thought, the hope of heaven and what's ahead when Christ comes to make all things new.

We're praying that people would know that. By God's Spirit at work in us. We pray for people that might get better, that people would get better. Of course we do that.

[11 : 21] But I don't think the general call to praying for the sick is what James is primarily encouraging here. There's way more to it than that, I think. And I think the key is seeing the Old Testament incident that James draws upon to make his case.

Do you see how James brings in Elijah to illustrate his point in verse 17? And at this point, why don't you turn in your Bibles to 1 Kings 17?

I'll give you just a few moments to do that. I think it's crucial that we see this just to get it right. 1 Kings 17. So why is he brought in Elijah?

That's the question, isn't it? Why is he brought in Elijah? Now, if James did have catch-all physical healing of the sick in his mind, and he wanted to use Elijah as an example, surely he would have gone for that wonderful moment in Elijah's life that you can read about, we can read about in 1 Kings 17, right?

Hopefully you've got it right there in front of you. What happens there? Verses 21 and 22, God working through Elijah. He's his prophet. Elijah raises a widow's son back to life.

[12 : 36] It's an incredible story. Incredible story. He cries out to the Lord in prayer, and God hears him, and the child's life came into him again.

That's the way the author puts it there. It's a wonderful story. It's an incredible miracle. And here's the point, I think. If the point, if you were James, if the point you were making was about general physical healing, then surely the book he's favourite for a passage that you would go to in Elijah's life would be this one, would it not?

It would be this one. If you were trying to rally the troops for a big prayer meeting, for the sick to be cured, that's the one that you would go for. But that's not the example that James draws upon.

The example he uses is the time in Israel's history when they were apathetically drifting along spiritually as God's people, and they were sliding into rebellion.

Okay, what were the nation marked by? You can read about this in just the next chapter. What was the defining feature of their life as a nation? Double-mindedness. As a nation, Israel drifting along. [13:49] Remember, they're meant to be the light to the nations, that the nations of the world look in and say, isn't Israel's God great? Surely he is the true God. Well, Israel at this point are holding their 50-50 scarves, right?

Thinking it was perfectly fine to worship Yahweh at the weekend and in Baal during the week. And all the while, the nation at this point in the story, first king's story, are led by King Ahab, who is heavily influenced by Queen Jezebel, who has fallen into disastrous idolatry and rebellion himself. This is a dark, dark moment for God's people. That's what's going on. And so in order to rouse them at this point in the story, first kings, from their double-mindedness, chapter 17, verse 1 of first kings, Elijah prophesies that God would send a drought on Israel as a judgment on them, right?

This is what God is going to do. So it's almost like a wake-up call to arouse them from their spiritual half-heartedness. This is what God is doing, okay? And God does so for three years.

Jump into chapter 18 if you've got it there. You'll see it, okay? Three years this goes on for. Until that is, and this is one of my favorite chapters in the whole of the Bible, right?

[15:11] If you're wanting a serious chapter to read when you go home, a thrilling bit of narrative and drama, get into the first kings 17, 18, 19 chapters, okay?

What happens in chapter 18 is that they have a show, there's a showdown in Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, right? And Elijah challenges them, the prophets, it's in 1 Kings, the people, sorry, 1 Kings 18, verse 21.

Here's what he says. What's this all about? How long will you waver between two opinions? This is Elijah challenging Israel, right? How long will you waver between two opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal is God, follow him. In other words, make up your mind. Stop wearing the 50-50 scarf. It doesn't work. And so what does he say?

The God who answers by fire is the true God. So Baal and his prophets, Baal and his prophets, they should win this one easy, right? They're on their home turf. It's all going for them.

[16:12] And they do their thing for ages and ages and ages. Does Baal answer by fire? No, he doesn't. There's nothing that goes on. And Elijah mocks him sarcastically.

Again, we said that this morning, right? So there's sarcasm in the Bible. You will notice it there in that chapter. But he turns to Elijah. Elijah prays to Yahweh.

And verse 38, the fire of the Lord falls. And the whole chapter, the whole scene is about God being declared, vindicated in front of all the people watching on, that he is the true God.

And the whole scene ends with the people of Israel rededicating themselves to the Lord. Elijah prays again. Verse 45, if you've got it there. And behold, the rains come, and the land bears fruit once more.

Now, back to James. Isn't it interesting that the example that James picks isn't an example of how prayer can heal the generally physically sick, although he could have easily opted for that one.

[17:24] Isn't it interesting that the incident that he opts for in Elijah's life is all about the power of prayer to restore the spiritually rebellious and wayward who have, as a result, come under God's judgment?

And so could it be that as he thinks, remember this, he's the pastor, pastor, sorry, as he thinks about the sad, sad situation into which he is writing, is it that James is strongly implying that something similar to what was happening with the nation of Israel in the first kings is happening to the people in James' church?

Could it be that some people in this church have fallen seriously sick as a direct result of their bad behavior towards God and more particularly because of their bad behavior towards others in the church?

It's sad, so sad. It's a sad, sad situation, and it's getting more and more absurd. It's sad, so sad. Why can't we talk it over?

Oh, it seems to me, sorry seems to be the hardest word. James' pastoral heart here for this people, whom he knows, whom he loves, is that they would rededicate themselves wholly to the Lord and they would get right with one another.

[18:54] So let's just take that interpretive lens that I've just presented this with and let's just read the verses and let's see if they begin to make a little bit more sense in that context.

Okay, verse 14, James chapter 5. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Now I take it here, James is calling for the elders, again I take it just as the representatives of the church as a whole, to be the ones who go after those who are falling into sickness because of their disobedience and are leading them in repentance and seeking to restore them relationally to the church family.

Now perhaps the oil is symbolically representing that person being set aside and rededicated themselves to the Lord.

Could it be that the hands on them are just again, just that symbolic identifying on behalf of the church what's going on in this situation, right? Verse 15, And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

[20 : 08] The Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Again, could it be that the prayer of faith that James has in mind is the one of repentance, of knowing forgiveness, and of rededication to the Lord?

Two more of these. Okay, verse 16, Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you might be healed. Could it be that there are individuals in this church family and you'll begin to see where the application of this is going, okay?

Who have fallen out badly. And it is influencing the church in negative ways and they are suffering as a result.

And what is James encouraging? He's encouraging that they humble themselves to the point that individuals are willing to get together, confess, confess, repent, hug it out, and forgive one another. Because the prayer of the righteous person, I take it, just all that stuff, is powerful and effective. Culminating in verse 19, 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 a multitude of sins.

[21 : 37] Friends, and of course, what is the heart of the gospel? What is the heart of our faith? Reconciliation. Isn't it? Being right with God, our creator, and being right reconciled with one another.

When we looked at Ephesians not so long ago, it was the wonderful heart of Paul's understanding of the gospel, wasn't it? That by his blood you have peace with one another.

The walls of hostility broken down because of what Jesus has on the cross. Two parties, Jew and Gentile, who would never come under the same roof, yet in Jesus, united, and more than playing happy families, united in the same family by his blood.

How powerful a witness is it to the world when our community defies logic? It can only be explained because of what Jesus has done. It's the very heartbeat of our God.

The very heartbeat of the gospel. Reconciliation. Friends, let me just say the Bible never encourages us. Remember this is a specific situation.

[22 : 40] The Bible never encourages us, never, to draw straight lines between sickness and our sin, right? Everything we've been thinking about in Job, isn't it, in the mornings.

The Bible never encourages us to draw a straight line between those things. Okay, so I think the application of this, if somebody we know in the church family is sick, right, we've not to go mm-hmm to one another, right, that's not the application of this passage.

And yet, I still think there are two big principles very close to God's heart that we as a congregation can learn from this specific situation.

And with this, I'm just going to try and give us two really quick things and maybe pull a lot of the strands of the letter together as we leave this tonight and as we feel the challenge that God makes us as a church congregation as we respond to the letter of James as a whole.

Right? Two of these really quickly. Here's the first one. Here's what I think what we need to take really seriously. Number one, and it's the call to single-mindedness. How much of this letter has been James helping them see how serious a thing it is in the Lord's sight when we try and wear the two halves, two halves, 50-50 scarf.

[24 : 01] And how damaging a thing that is to our own hearts and souls as well. But what is it then that James has consistently brought his congregation back to see all the time, all the way through this letter, is the very character of God.

Remember what we said, this is not just trying to be better. Right? Be better. Why can't you be better? No, no, no. We've got to have an encounter with the living God who loves us. That's what's going to change our hearts.

The indwelling spirit. It's why he's brought it out, hasn't he, in chapter four. God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell where? In us.

He's brought them back to the very character of God, right? The all-wise, generous, and unchanging father of chapter one. God whose implanted word, and I love that phrase, the implanted word at work in us has the power to save our souls and has the power to transform us.

The God who, chapter four, longs to give more grace. Longs to give more grace. Love that image. [25 : 14] Just longs to give it, longs to bestow it upon his people. The merciful and compassionate God of chapter five. Again, do you see it?

He's just brought them back to the character of God. And so when we, when the call comes for complete devotion to him, the call is not to come begrudgingly to a headmaster, right?

You ever had that experience of your headmaster at school? I remember mine. I knew the power he had. I knew who he was. I saw him coming up the corridor and didn't stop for a chat. I legged it into another classroom, right? But that's not the image of God that James is describing here as a compassionate father.

Our sins, friends, we shouldn't run from him. We should run to him knowing that he will bestow grace upon us. And this God does not share the throne of his people's hearts with anyone.

And let me just say it's for our joy that God is like that. This letter is a call to single-mindedness.

[26 : 23] And flowing from that, secondly, this letter is a call to relational oneness. In other words, our relationships with one another. One of the big challenges that's laid out in this letter is the challenge to have a serious think in all of every area of our lives.

Have a think about the way in which we view and we treat other people. And to see how seriously God takes that.

It was Francis Schaeffer, famous American evangelical thinker back in the day who famously said that with God there are no little people. right? And what he meant was that every human being has been made in the image of God.

Every single human being made in the image of God. And therefore, friends, we have not to do, and he's outed this in this church, hasn't he, all the way through the letter, we're not to play favorites with who we love.

We're not to pick and choose who we're kind to, who we consider. It's why, and I love it as you read through the Gospels, it's why the disciples find it so baffling that Jesus would encourage the little children to come to him.

[27 : 34] You ever read that bit in the Gospels and you thought, what's going on there? Of course, it's a very different cultural setting, isn't it? Children in our day treated very differently from children in that day.

Children, people who had nothing to offer you in return, people who were considered not high up in the social ladder, and yet Jesus uses them, welcomes the children, and uses it as an opportunity to show his followers that how we treat the least in our society is a measure of greatness, according to him.

He just flips it on his head, doesn't he, his definition of greatness. How we treat and how we view other people matters to God. And I take it now, just as we're speaking here, that God's Spirit will be moving amongst us.

Maybe, friends, there's something that we need to do in response to this tonight. Was there a harsh word that we said? You know, I think about it all the time sometimes. When you're going to Tesco to buy your groceries, or you're at cost to buy your coffee, whatever it is you're doing, right, you're speaking to people.

Friends, do we stop and consider that this person is made in the image of God? Right? We don't just take it for granted. They're not just there to serve us. No, no, no. We are there to serve them. How about tomorrow when you go about your business?

[28 : 45] You ask people how they're doing. How was your day? Right? Always love it when I, you know you've got the name badges with the names on it. Always kind of freaks people out when you use their names, right? But it's that way of doing it. I'm actually interested in who you are because you are a human being made in the image of God.

Christ died for you. I want to get to know you. But just call and courtesy in the way that we go about our lives. Jesus says, how we treat the least is the very definition of greatness.

Our willingness to get involved and really care for those who have, so to speak, nothing to offer us in return. How counter-cultural is that? You know, I get emails all the time.

Do you know who from? I've never signed up for it. LinkedIn. All the time. Would you like to? This person wants to be your friend. LinkedIn. What is LinkedIn all about, right? It's this website where you're actively encouraged to put yourselves out there.

Remember when the law firm I worked for down south, business cards, on your desk, packets of them. Just give them out to everybody. What are we encouraged to do in this world? Promote ourselves, right?

[29 : 48] Always use people to get ahead. Climb the pole. Advance yourselves. See how Jesus just flips it on its head. Maybe in particular in the context of this letter as we think about it, how we treat one another in the church.

How we use our words. You know, I've got a friend who says we should have a license for our words. You've got a license because there's just so much harm can come from our words and particularly how we use them when we're thinking about our brothers and sisters.

Right? Friends, it would do well to remember that we are in a spiritual battle. And would the devil not just love it if he could somehow get in between our relationships with one another?

Wouldn't he love it if for the next number of years that you were in this church family that one person sat over there, one person sat over there and never spoke to one another? And that rift that existed between them, it went unchallenged, it went undealt with for years and years and years and years.

We are in a spiritual battle but we need to see that damaged relationships are a big thing in the eyes of the Lord. I take it, friends, is there someone, as we think about it just now, in our lives, is there someone tonight that we need to make the first move towards?

[31 : 20] You know, let me just ask, I ask myself this all the time, when was the last time you said sorry? Right? Just, you said, put your hands up, I'm so sorry I got it wrong.

When was the last time we did that with one another? You know, are there people in this church family who we need to get right with? You know, that niggling thought about somebody that's been lingering in the bottom of your heart, this passage tonight says deal with it.

Deal with it. Who do you need to text tonight? Who do you need to ring later in the week? Who do you need to visit? Who do you need to go out your way for to make sure that you are right with one another?

You know, it was D.A. Carson and I love this quote, he said, all of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down except to put them down in our prayer lists. How many of our disagreements, our misunderstandings, our feelings of bitterness and lack of forgiveness in the body of Christ, friends, would disappear if we looked at our conflict in light of eternity?

Does it really matter? What are we getting all tight about, thinking about what is ahead of us, what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross? James' pastoral heart here is that these people who he knows and who he loves would rededicate themselves firstly to the Lord, single-mindedness, and secondly to one another, their unity.

[33 : 00] You know, we started with Elton John. Let me just finish with Stuart Townend, right, to finish on a spiritual note. As Stuart Townend wrote, he's written this wonderful song about the unity that we're to have as brothers and sisters because of stemming from our unity with God.

Friends, let me just read these words to us, and then we're just going to have a few moments of silence, particularly before we come before the Lord and take communion together tonight.

Wonderful thing to, space for us to reflect on the challenge that's come from God's word tonight.

The words of Stuart Townend, Oh, how good it is when the family of God dwell together in spirit in love and unity, where the bonds of peace, of acceptance and love, are the fruits of his presence here among us.

And so with one voice, we'll sing to the Lord, and with one heart, we'll live out his word, till the whole world sees the Redeemer has come, for he dwells in the presence of his people.

Why don't we just be silent for a few moments, and then I'll lead us in prayer. Psalm 16.

[34 : 22] You show me the path of life. In your presence, there is fullness of joy. In your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

And so, Father, I pray tonight for us all, Lord, as a church family, Lord, that we would be marked by a devotion to your son, the Lord Jesus. Father, thank you for that wonderful description of him in John chapter 1, that he is one full of grace and truth.

Father, for some of us here tonight, as we've maybe responded to James chapter 5 this evening, as we've maybe mulled on all that James' letter has contained. Father, I pray for us, perhaps tonight, some of us who have gone cold.

Father, would you, by your spirit, ignite that deep love for you as we grasp more of the magnitude of what you have done for us in sending Jesus.

Father, there is no one like you. And Father, I pray for our relationships with one another as well, Lord, that you would be at work in our lives. Prompt us by your spirit, challenge us, put people on our minds.

[35 : 32] Father, help us, mould us, challenge us, make us into the people that you have called us to be. Thank you, Father, for your commitment to us as your people. And we pray all these things in Jesus' wonderful and precious name.

Amen.