



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Confession: Good for the Church

James 5:16

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Introduction

1. James 5:16 seems straightforward. We know the Bible well enough to know that sin has to be confessed, that God wants his people to do his will in a “one another” community, and that we should pray for one another.
2. But, then we start to think more about the particulars of what James said.¹
 - a. How do we apply the expectation of community confession? What will it look like?
 - b. What things are we to confess? All sins, or just certain ones?
 - c. How do we make it work in the church?
 - 1) Are we to do something like the small meetings in the 18 th century “methodist” movement where each was required to confess his or her sins?²
 - 2) Or is it enough to follow Matthew 5:24-26 and seek out a person who has sinned against us in a particular way (see Moo, 246)?
 - 3) Or, do the plural verbs and pronouns, including the reciprocal “one another” (ἀλλήλων, *allēlōn*; twice in James 5:16) call for something more?
3. Is James telling Christians something we are all to do as individuals, or something we are to do together *as* a community?

Body

I. Review: What Is Confession?

A. Confession is acknowledgment.

1. Moo, 246, reminds us that “confess” in v. 16 (ἐξομολογέω, *exomologeō*) “means, basically, ‘agree with’ (see Luke 22:6), but in the NT usually refers to a verbal acknowledgment of God’s greatness (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21; Rom. 14:11; 15:9; Phil. 2:11) or of our own sins (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5; Acts 19:18).”
2. To briefly review, notice just two examples from last time:
 - a) Matt 10:32 calls for the persecuted to acknowledge Jesus (vv. 23-35).
 - b) Matt 3:6 says John’s preaching led many to confess their sins, unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees who were present (vv. 7-9).

¹ Points a-c are from Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 257.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 246.

- B. Confession, then, includes verbalization, but only as part of the willingness to humbly acknowledge the existence or rightful place of that which is being confessed.

II. Daniel 9:4-19: A Case Study from a World James Knew Well.

- A. Corporate confession in corporate prayer for corporate forgiveness is one type of sin acknowledgment we see in the Old Testament.³
- B. One of the most complete examples is Daniel's prayer (9:4-19).
1. He prays in the first year of Darius's reign (ca. 539 BC) while reflecting on Jeremiah's prediction of a seventy-year captivity (vv. 1-2; cf. Jer. 25:11; 29:10).
 2. The prayer will end with a bold call on the Lord to forgive the people of Israel and restore their respect in the world community (vv. 16-19, esp. 18-19).
 3. Daniel declares, "I prayed to the Lord and made confession" (v. 4), but the language throughout is corporate: "we have sinned, . . . have not listened. . . , to us belongs open shame . . . , we have rebelled against him . . ." (vv. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).
 4. The confession in the prayer is bracketed by an explicit reference to covenant (v. 4) and an allusion to the events that made them a covenant people (v. 15).⁴
 5. Daniel includes *all* Israel among those who committed the *specific* sins he lists, even though some (like Jeremiah and Daniel) had not been equally guilty.
 - a) Sin, wrongdoing, rebellion, disobedience (v. 5, repeated in vv. 8-10).
 - b) Failing to listen to the prophets (v. 6).
 - c) Including those who had been scattered into many lands (v. 7).
 - d) "All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice" (v. 11); so, all Israel was cursed as Moses had predicted (vv. 11-13).
 - e) Worse, despite their calamity, they had not [as a community] "entreated the favor of the Lord our God. . ." (v. 13).
- C. It's a powerful prayer, all the more so because it's a *corporate* prayer.

III. James 5:16: Corporate Confession for Corporate Sin.

- A. The best sense of James 5:16 is that he has something like Daniel's prayer in mind.
1. He has noted a circumstance where one person has an illness/weakness.
 2. But, he clearly shifts to a corporate concern in v. 16, as the plurals show.
 - a) Anyone who is sick/weak should call for the elders whose prayer will restore him and see the Lord raise him up.
 - b) If a specific sin is behind his sickness/weakness, he can be assured that the same prayer will result in the sin being forgiven.
 - c) Since that was the case, the community can be assured that they will be healed when they confess sin, the same power being at work in that case, too.
- B. If we keep the writing as a whole in mind, we expect this emphasis.

³ "Corporate prayer requires corporate confession, and this produces corporate forgiveness. This is not new in James. Daniel's prayer in Dan. 9:4-10 particularly expresses corporate confession as a prerequisite to corporate forgiveness and a preliminary to corporate intercession." (McCartney, 257).

⁴ The key to applying the prayer today is to note that Israel was a physical theocracy, occupying a land in a designated geographical location. It is spiritual Israel, the new covenant community, who needs to apply it now, made up of all in every nation who submit to God's reign (cf. Rom. 9:6-8; Gal. 6:16; Acts 10:34-35).

1. From his opening statement about trials, James has consistently spoken in terms of the group (e.g., the pronouns and plural verbs in 1:3, 5).⁵
 2. The sins he mentions are spoken in plural terms (e.g., 1:21-22, 27).
 3. Specific problems, such as the showing of favoritism to one type person, were laid at the feet of the group (2:1-7)
 4. The fights of 4:1-3, leading to the call for humility (4:6-10), were communal.
- C. "Corporate confession is appropriate for corporate sin" (McCartney, 258).
1. Yes, individuals are personally accountable, and should confess as needed.
 2. But, the community will also have troubles and wounds that will be healed only through *corporate* confession, even when, as in Daniel's day, not every person in the community had committed every specific sin.
 3. Since confession is more about acknowledgment than verbalization, this makes sense; sometimes, community problems and wounds are never resolved because the *community* will not acknowledge the problems and need for healing.⁶

Conclusion

1. In a time where congregations are often more individuals who happen to worship together than a body of "members one of another" (Rom. 12:5; Eph. 4:25), it may be that nothing will help us more to be a "one of another" community than corporate confession. That's especially true in a church which, like James's, is under such duress and trial.
2. May we think long and hard about the implications of these things and determine to work, grow, and yes, confess our failings *together*.

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⁵ Although it is obscured by the English use of the second person pronoun "you" for both singular and plural, James consistently used plurals throughout his writing. Thus, whatever application individuals might make, the community is always in view.

⁶ The ideas of confessing and praying for "one another" still fit this communal understanding, for often the biggest obstacle to community prayer is achieving the kind of solidarity where the community as a whole will admit to such a problem and not have some members distancing themselves from community failings because they "were not the ones involved." The way Daniel included himself — and implied that even someone like Jeremiah shared the community guilt — is instructive.