

# A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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## *“The Missing Element”*

The fifth in a series entitled, The Work We Do

James 5: 14-20

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Frederica Mathewes-Green writes in her book The Illumined Heart, **“What is this human condition, this time-less question? ... we could say that it is the riddle of why none of us feel really at home in this world. We’re not consciously aware of this uneasiness every minute, of course; with enough entertaining distractions, we can hold it at bay. But still it’s there all the time, just under the surface, a murmuring unease. Almost unheard but still persistent, it rushes in the background of our lives like an underground river.”**

She’s right, isn’t she? In your most honest moments, you know about what she writes. Anyone of us could have written that... maybe not so poetically but it would be our testimony. It’d be different for each of us... each of us would tweak it...

Some of us would write it this way... **“I seem to live with this vague, persistent feeling that I’m always disappointing people. The river in the background of my life is full of guilty feelings.”**

Others of us might write... **“The riddle of my life is that I can’t stop comparing myself to everyone else.”**

Or it might be that the “murmuring unease” of your life is that you just tend to be anxious a lot... Or angry, a lot...

Or seemingly left out, a lot...

It’s rushing on in the background of your life like an underground river.

And when we’re awake enough and honest enough and still enough to be aware of it... it’s hard... It’s painful. But... there’s a flip side to it... there are two sides to that old record you play (for those born after 1980 records are what we used to call, CDs). There’s a flip side to the pain. And it’s that your pain can push you to making changes in your life. It can cause you to finally say,

**“I want to be different...**

**I want to grow...**

**I’m ready to go to work.”**

And for a month now, with James as our teacher, we’ve been thinking together about The Work We Do.

And I do want to back track for a minute today. I don’t want this to be the kind of thing where we, as James says, **hear the word but never do it**. So I want to review and review with the notion that we all might actually do some of what we’ve been talking about.

Remember, there’s a river rushing in the background of your life... it’s there all the time and it is prompting you to pay attention and to work. And here’s some of the work James seems to call us to.

Growth begins with submission... It starts with obedience. We want to be free, free from what nags at us and free to love as God made us to love. And James says, **there is a law that leads to freedom**. There is something we must submit to... a law that takes us where we want to go. Our work begins there... at the moral level.

If we’re serious about growing, this is sort of spirituality 101. We can’t make any real progress if we’re in a moral mess. And don’t just go to backseat, bodily morality... This isn’t just about too much, smokin’, “dancin”, drinkin’, chewin’ ... eatin’ ... cheatin’ ... beatin’ ... heatin’ ... indiscreetin’...

This isn't just about all the stuff that makes us blush... but it is about that. If there's an area of our lives where we are out of control, we have to start there. But it's not just about that kind of morality... Dealing with those passions...

It's also about taking care of widows and orphans... the vulnerable.

And it's about giving to those who don't have.

And walking the second mile with someone...

And loving whoever happens to be your neighbor.

It's doing what Jesus told us to do... with loving enemies at the top of the list.

So...

... if we're ready. That's where we must start... we start in submission to Christ... doing what we are told to do... being obedient to this law that leads to freedom. And we shouldn't say "amen" ... not unless we've taken the time to see our own disobedience... our own addictions and compulsions and aversions... and do something about them by the grace of God.

It's where we start.

Then, in week two, we talked about developing an "inner witness." Remember the scenario... rich guy walks into church and everyone lit up, and did so while they ignored a poor person... remember the idea? The principle? People are going to show up in our lives... specific people... who will be for us the opportunity to grow.

When we start to work intentionally, we start noticing things... in particular who lights us up? Why? Who turns us off? Why? Who are we afraid of? Bored by? Drawn to? Why?

We start watching and when we do, the work we must do will present itself to us... and the person becomes the opportunity for us to grow up.

So... someone walks into worship... and we notice it... we notice that we don't want to be with them, don't want to know them... think we don't like them. They're different... we notice that... but instead of avoiding them, like we would typically do, we go and sit down next to them.

Now, we're working... and people have become the path.

There's a moral path we have to walk...

A people path we must pay attention to...

And there is the Way of Words... Word Watching. Remember the teaching? The tongue is both a thermometer and a thermostat... It tells us about the condition of our inner life and it can help determine it. (Richard Foster)

Anyone been watching their words lately? I have, I was at breakfast this week and had to repent for saying something critical about someone. It didn't need to be said.

And I found myself chattering because of some anxiety... but I caught myself worried, I guess, about what someone thought of me.

Shutting up, is spiritual work.

Getting still and quiet inside,

Is essential spiritual work.

I hope you're taking that seriously.

Last week, we talked about the work of surrender... surrendering over and over again. **"Yes, I want to upgrade now. Yes, give me the upgraded version of me."** It is, "the core soul gesture." (Cynthia Bourgeault)

We cannot progress apart from this... and it's an action we practice in order that the soul might be well... (that the hard-drive might finally function as it was made.)

Well, there's the review... and the list isn't exhaustive for sure... it's not even everything that James addresses... but it gives us a place to start, something to work on.

The moral path...

The people path...

Word Watching...

And surrender... click the 'yes' button... again and again.

There's something missing though... something critical we haven't talked about. And it's what James gets to at the end of his letter. It's you... plural. We... us... the community... the church.

Our progress will be limited without one another. So, on this last page, James reminds his readers of each other. Did you notice?

**“Anybody sick? Well... bring the leaders, the mature of the church, together and let them pray together over them.”**

And **“confess your sins... to each other.”**

And... **“if anyone wanders away from the truth... go get them and bring them back.”**

These last words of instruction are about the community... and the power of it... To heal, to forgive, and to restore. It's James' way of saying we're not alone and we can't do this by ourselves. We just can't. It's one of the spiritual laws of the universe... you can't grow up by yourself.

Even God is in community.

God is... community.

God is mutuality.

Father, Son, and Spirit... each completely loving and emptying eternally into one another. This is the nature of what is... Reality is relational. And if that's so, how in the world do we think we can get to what is real a part from relationships.

When we started this church 13 years ago... we learned something early on... when there were only 27 of us on the phone list. We learned that knowing one another had a great deal to do with what our worship was like.

When I sang, *“Great is thy faithfulness,”* it changed the experience for me knowing how God's faithfulness was keeping a brother in the pew behind me from sinking.

We knew each other's stories and it made a difference as we celebrated “thee story.” Worship went to another level. It wasn't somehow, simply the right form or the right message. It was presence... to one another and to God. Vulnerability to one another created vulnerability to Spirit.

It's fascinating, really. Bring people together who are open to God's presence, who are “in Christ,” and something exponential takes place. 2 and 2 don't make 4, not always anyway. Sometimes they make 40... and sometimes 400... and sometimes 4000. **“Where two or three are gathered... there I am also. If two are three ask in my name... my presence... in me... mountains may move.”** It's not hocus-pocus... it's more like a law of the spiritual realm.

And it's a law that is in operation all the time... not just in worship. Sit down with another human being and talk about your life, see what happens. Sit down with a group and prayerfully discuss the faith, and see what happens. See if light bulbs don't go off. See if you don't see.

We need one another... We need a community focused on the work we're doing together. Frederica Mathewes-Green, who I quoted earlier, said that the early Christians had a great advantage over us because they were a part of a community of consciousness...

Where everyone was fasting (for instance) on Wednesdays...

Everyone understood the need for spiritual direction...

Everyone got that worship couldn't be done in isolation...

Everyone understood the value of community.

Ours is a society of what Thomas Merton called “phony individualism.” We have fooled ourselves into believing that we actually exist apart from one another... that there is such a thing as a self in isolation. It's an illusion.

We've got it all wrong. *I do my thing... you do yours...* and in the process neither one of us make much progress.

James knows different... So, he encourages us to gather and pray... that's work we must do.

He invites us to confess our sins to one another, that work we must do. **But can't we just go straight to God ourselves**, we Protestants protest. Well of course you can, but sometimes it helps to have a face... and grace that gets incarnated in your words of blessing. Jesus, remember, gave his disciples the power to forgive sins. If you're stuck... in your guilt... you need a friend to hear your confession.

It's private, I know... but it's also your life, your salvation, wholeness... there's more at stake here than your pride.

That's why James admonishes us to go after one another, and that's work we do... **"If someone's wandering away... go after them."** Could you do that?

I know this kind of thing can be abused and has led to all sorts of self-righteousness. Paul even warns the church and says, **if you're going to confront someone, you better take a close look at yourself first. Authentic, healthy, spiritual community, is not a cult... it isn't coercive... it isn't anxious and defensive, but there is initiative with one another.**

It could be real hard...

But, if done in the right spirit...

Would be real loving as well.

I hope you'll do that for me... I'll need it someday... for sure. Because I cannot do this on my own. You... you all are the essential ingredient.

And I am for you. Without one another, without a teaching and tradition, without a culture of spiritual growth... we'll be slaves to another culture and to our egos, and smaller ideas... and lesser instincts.

And our efforts to grow morally will be uninspired and frustrated. And our capacity to discern... so limited. And real surrender, next to impossible. You can't do that, and be alone... Who'd want to?

We need one another... being together is essential to the work we do. As one mystic put it, "The power of Love is waiting to do its work, and if we stubbornly independent and isolated people would humble ourselves enough to overcome our separateness, our suspicion, and our pride, the miracle of unity would still be possible." (Helmiski)

Amen

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