

**Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.**

**(James 5:9)**

## Introduction

One of the reasons for becoming a member of the local church is so that you have a sphere in which to obey the numerous New Testament one anothers. Clearly, you cannot do these in isolation (though some certainly try!). Of course, the reason for this is that these are relational commands. We prove our connection with and our commitment to Jesus Christ in community, and by community. Every one another is addressed to those living out their faith in community with the body of Christ—that is, the local church. We can so that evidence that we are in union with Jesus Christ is by our practical pursuit of unity in the body of Christ.

Guarding the unity of the body of Christ is an ongoing responsibility. It is for this reason that the majority of the one anothers assume the potential presence of conflict: Forgive one another; be kind to one another; don't provoke one another; stop envying one another; etc. These commands only make sense in the presence of conflict.

The one another of James 5:9 is also found in the presence in the context of potential conflict. The apostle writes, "Do not grumble against one another, brothers." What does this mean and how do we obey this command?

## The Context: Grief and the Need for Patience

First, let's spend a moment to understand what it means to "grumble." The Greek word is found six times in the New Testament (see Mark 7:34—"sighed"; Romans 8:23—"groan"; 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4—"groan"; Hebrews 13:17—"groaning"). It means to sigh, to groan, or to murmur, and can even be used of inaudible prayer. It refers to something going on inside, rather than external behaviour. It refers to an unease in one's spirit. It can be a legitimate sigh (2 Corinthians 5:2, 4) or a grievous sigh (Hebrews 13:17), as here.

James is warning against an agitated spirit, but whereas there can be such a thing as a holy agitation, there is also an unholy agitation, as here.

But before we look more closely at this unholy agitation, an understanding of the context will help us to apply this exhortation.

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Simply, the context of this exhortation is that of injustice, specifically, economic injustice (5:1ff). This seemed to be a major issue facing James' readers (see 2:1ff).

Apparently, many were being oppressed by the wealthy, with severe consequences. James aims to give them hope, as well as exhortation to persevere righteously. It seems that many of James' readers were being oppressed by the wealthy. They were suffering, and James was aware of and concerned about this. More to the point, he was aware, not only of their problem, but also of even more potential problems that would come from a wrong response. He wrote, then, to give them hope and exhortation to persevere righteously.

He reminds them about the coming of the Lord, which he expected to happen soon. James understood that they were living in the last days of the Judaistic era. He knew that, sooner than later, Jesus would come in judgement upon Jerusalem and economic collapse would occur (Revelation 18), bringing a measure of justice. In the meanwhile, they were to remain resolute ("be patient" [vv. 7, 8, 10]), to remain resilient (v. 8—"establish your hearts"), and to resist sinning (vv. 9, 12). In a word, they were to exercise godly self-restraint.

This is the context of the one another before us in this study. And often, our context is the same.

Like these believers who have gone before us, life can be grievous. Life can be unjust. Life can be filled with deep pain. When this is the case, we are tempted to 'grumble.' As John Blanchard comments, "Few things test us more clearly than our attitude to life's pressures and problems and especially those which involve personal offence." I must admit at this point that I wish I could unpack a one another that would not convict me!

Our spirits can grumble against God as we grumble against our circumstances. Our spirits can grumble against those that have caused the pain. Our spirits can grumble against those who don't feel our pain. Our spirits can grumble against those closest to us—such as our "brothers" (v. 9). "So often the first people to suffer when we begin to crack under the strain are our fellow Christians" (Motyer).

I recall a time when I was out running and ran past a house in which two Rottweilers were angrily barking at me from behind the steel gate. When they realised that they could not get at me, they turned on each other. Sadly, this is the way we can often be in the church: We can quickly turn on each other when, like Cain, we can't get at the real source of our anger (see Galatians 5:15).

## Be Patient (7, 8, 10, 11)

Someone has written,

Patience is a virtue,  
seize it if you can,  
seldom found in women,  
and never found in man.

The word translated “patience” (vv. 7, 8, 10, 11) means to be long-spirited. It is used in Hebrews 6:15 with reference to Abraham who “endured” as he waited on the Lord. It refers to a patient spirit or a spirit of patience. It is a strong word for restraining anger and resentment. The idea is that we are rule our spirit (Proverbs 25:28) and guard our heart (Proverbs 4:23) in the midst of the heat.

Anthony Bird writes,

Grumbling is a mark of impatience and an indication that faith has failed, so that what was meant for a test has become a temptation.... Grumbling against others is a sin that occurs whenever we lapse into thinking that the world is not fully under God’s control. It shows a lack of self-control in the face of provocation, and it is fuelled by feelings of frustration, hurt, or anger. Grumbling is an attempt to defend our interests, or to get back at those whom we perceive to have wronged us.

A key component in resisting this temptation is patience. Like the farmer, we depend on God for the outcome. As Motyer has observed, “In the farming world, patience is a fruitful virtue.” For all of the hard work done by a farmer, perhaps the most difficult is simply that of waiting. So it is when we suffer. So it is when we are oppressed. One of the things for which people most admire Nelson Mandela was his patience while he suffered. Christians can learn a lot from him in that respect.

Remember brothers and sisters, the devil’s scheme is to ‘divide and conquer’ (1 Cor 10:10). We are not ignorant of his devices. Neither should we be ignorant of our sinful tendency to take out on other our own pain. Resist this. Be patient by looking to the Lord and trusting him for the harvest.

## The Concern: Grumbling and the Need for Self-Control

Even as it repeats the exhortation to be patient, v. 8 adds another exhortation, “Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.”

The word “establish” means to stand firm. It means to turn resolutely in a certain direction. It means to be unmoveable. This is an exhortation to think before we speak, before we act. It is akin to Psalm 112:7-8: “He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD. His heart is steady; he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph on his adversaries.”

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When we face injustice or injury, we must exercise self-control by the Spirit's control. That is, if we will keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 18, 25), we will learn to keep our mouths shut. We will "endure as the ambassadors of God. We will make sure that we really live for him" (Boice).

This is the challenge, is it not? James has said this repeatedly (3:1-12; 4:1-7, 11ff). But note how this is not merely a matter of speech but fundamentally a matter of our spirit (4:1-3, 11ff). For, as Jesus taught, the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart.

When you are wronged, injured, oppressed, or treated unjustly, take yourself in hand. And be careful who and what you listen to. As Paul Tripp says, no one speaks to us more than ourselves. Be careful that you properly control the conversation!

Speak truth to yourself, which will require that you rule your spirit. Speak God's character to yourself. Remind yourself of who he is. Speak Scripture, such as "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Reflect on those who have gone before you and learn from their examples (vv. 10ff). Ask for prayer before the meltdown. Listen to wise counsellors with biblical and therefore counter-cultural advice. Remember the promise of God: He will make all things new. Let him be your defence. God will set things right one day, which means you don't have to (Romans 12:14-21). God will vindicate his church. Trust him to do so.

## Here Comes the Judge

James warns, as he did in 4:11-12, that, if we grumble against one another, we are sinning against our brothers and sisters and our Father will judge us for this: "Behold, the Judge is standing at the door" (v. 9).

Our Father loves all his children, so be careful.

The injunction to refrain from judging, lest you be judged (Matthew 7:1) applies to everyone—including those in the church! Jesus taught, and James reiterates, that we need to take great care about how we think about one another. We are not the final judge. Beware of rendering a wrong verdict. You will be held to account.

There are many cases in criminal justice systems where innocent people were declared guilty and yet later acquitted. Beware of such a thing in the church. Give the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, if there is tension between you and another, seek to engage. Seek to reconcile. This will go a long way towards calming an agitated spirit and will reduce the temptation to grumble.

## The Cure: Gospel and the Need for Grace

The practical counsel given in the previous point is all predicated on the appropriation and application of the gospel. The only way to obey this one another, as with all of the one another, is by the grace of God. And we get this grace by the gospel.

I think that we see this principle in the words of v. 11: “You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” This last phrase strikes me as foundational for obeying this one another. That is, as we reflect on the compassion (“pity”) and mercifulness of the Lord, our spirit finds rest and our speech is restrained.

As we remember the gospel of the grace of God, we are empowered to exercise self-constraint. Why is this? Because the gospel reminds us that the God who saved us is compassionate and merciful (v.11). That is, he is good. He therefore continues to save us. We are not alone. We have not been abandoned. We are not left to our devices. God will have his way.

As we remember that we are sinners who deserve God’s wrath, yet who have been redeemed by God sending his Son to die in our place, we are moved to let go of grudges, to forgive, and to leave the matter in God’s hands.

After all, since Jesus Christ rose from the dead for our justification, and since we are declared righteous because Jesus gave us his righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21), and since we know that we are accepted in the beloved, we don’t need to defend ourselves. We can trust God to take care of us. We can love each other by no longer envying and blaming one another.

This also helps us to love mercy and do justly, rather than being obsessed with getting justice. We should seek to do justly, but we need to beware of expecting justice in this world. Leave that with God and, in the meantime, focus on grace.

In short, as we experience the gospel of the grace of God, we will be able to exercise and express this same grace of God to one another. And therefore, we will not grumble against one another.

AMEN