

Powerful Prayer, James 5:13-20
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What is the role of prayer in your life? I was thinking this week about the urgency and gravity there ought to be in our prayers. And I was feeling convicted regarding my own prayer life, that I need to have a greater awareness of my dependence on God and therefore the seriousness and importance of communicating with Him.

By way of comparison, think of other communication that happens in the course of life. Think of the casual request for help. When my parents were visiting at Thanksgiving, and they got here a few days before Thanksgiving, I asked my dad to help me with a house project. I needed to repair and repaint the molding around the front door on our house. And my dad is really good with things like that. So I asked my dad, Hey would you be willing to help me out with this. And he did. And we had a good time working on that together and were pleased with the outcome. That was a non-urgent, casual ask for help.

But then contrast that with the urgency and seriousness of someone calling for help in the midst of an earthquake. We've seen in the news, recent earthquakes in New Guinea and in Puerto Rico. Think of how terrifying that would be to feel the ground shaking beneath you and knowing that the building you're standing in could crumble. Landslides and devastating could be moments away. Think of how you would call out for help in that situation. And think if you had loved ones around you, or you had loved ones in another part of the building or another part of the city, and you're calling out for help on their behalf as well.

When I pray, when we pray, there needs to be some more of that intensity and desperation in our prayers. Not that we need to be freaking out all the time. But as we have a deeper acknowledgement of how weak and needy we are, how helpless we are to actually fix the problems around us and the problems inside of us . . . that understanding of our dependence on God will transform our prayers from just a causal request for help into an intense cry for rescue. And as we'll see in our passage this morning, we're crying out for the help we need, personally, as well as crying out for help on behalf of our loved ones, praying for one another.

This passage is about prayer, and therefore my hope is that we will all leave today feeling convicted and encouraged and inspired to be men and women of fervent prayer. When we're suffering, when we're cheerful, when we're sick—to be constantly and consciously depending on the Lord. We need to be spending

time alone in prayer. We need to be spending time with others in prayer. And we need to trust that God is powerful to work through our prayers to accomplish His will.

Prayer and Praise (verse 13)

James says, first of all, in verse 13, “Is anyone among you suffering?” This could be any kind of suffering. Elisabeth Eliot put it so simply, like this, “Suffering is having what you don’t want or wanting what you don’t have.” There’s all kinds of suffering. And in one way or another, we could probably all raise our hands and say, Yes, I’m suffering. What should I do?

James says, “Let him pray.” We are commanded to pray. We might feel like prayer is unimportant, ineffective. We might feel like we just don’t have time to pray; our time would be better spent trying to fix the problem. But prayer demonstrates our dependence on God. We need to stop what we’re doing to humble ourselves before God’s power and God’s plans. We need to acknowledge that we cannot fix the problem, and it might not even be God’s will to fix the problem in the way we have in mind. We need to acknowledge these things before God in prayer.

What if God is allowing, ordaining this trial in your life for the purpose of drawing you closer to Him? And part of how He intends that to happen is that you will come to a deeper understanding of your own weaknesses, your limitations, your neediness, so that you’ll cry to Him for help.

In the second half of verse 13 James addresses another situation, which may or may not be separate from the first. “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.” The word he uses here refers more to a person’s emotional state than to the outward circumstances. In fact, the two other places it’s used in the New Testament are both in Acts 27 where Paul was on a boat in the middle of the raging sea, and he told the others on the boat “*to take heart* (be cheerful), for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship” (verse 22, and again in verse 25). And then he says it again a few verses later, “So take heart (be cheerful) men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.” Cheerfulness is not at odds with trials. It’s not as though a person is *either* suffering *or* cheerful. Therefore whatever your circumstances, take your needs to the Lord in prayer, and take your cheerfulness to the Lord in songs of praise. The Greek word for “songs of praise” is *psallō*, from which we get the word “psalm.” The term originally meant to pluck a stringed instrument, but then it came to refer to singing in general. In the New Testament it is used of singing to the Lord, as in Ephesians 5:19, “addressing one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing* and making melody to the Lord with your heart.” This is the kind of

rejoicing and gladness that should flow from our hearts because of God's goodness to us. He is faithful. He always keeps His promises. He is working all things together for our good. And therefore we have much to be cheerful about, even in the midst of suffering. We have much to sing about.

One of the things I love about our church is how we sing. And it's not just because many of you have beautiful voices. I'm happy for that. But what really moves me is how this congregation sings praises to the Lord from the heart. We're not here to put on a show for anyone. We come together in song in order to joyfully express our delight in God. What a privilege this is!

Praying Elders (verse 14)

Moving on to verse 14 we'll look at praying elders. James asks the next question, "Is anyone among you sick?" He began with the broad category of suffering, then he mentioned cheerfulness, and now he turns his attention specifically to the person who is physically ill. And the instruction for this person is that he or she should call for the elders of the church.

In the New Testament we find two distinct offices within the church. There is the office of elder (also referred to as pastor, or overseer, or bishop), and then there is the office of deacon. Each congregation is to have elders and deacons, and we see here the assumption that there is a plurality of elders in each local congregation. The sick person is to call for the elders (plural) of the church.

Elders, according to 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1, are to be men who are above reproach, who are morally upright, who are able to teach, who are spiritual leaders, spiritual role models. And this involves giving special attention to prayer and to the Word of God. It's these spiritually mature men who are to be called when a person is gravely ill. This certainly doesn't exclude others from praying for the sick. Rather, I think part of the point in calling the elders of the church is that they represent the church as a whole. The sick person calls the elders, as the spiritual leaders of the congregation, and also as the representatives of the entire congregation. This person, because of their severe physical condition, cannot make it to where the church is gathering, so, in effect, the church comes to them.

The anointing with oil is taken in various ways. If you come from a Roman Catholic background, you're familiar with the sacrament of extreme unction, which is part of what is called the "last rites." Extreme Unction is the practice of anointing people with oil just before they die in order to remove sin and prepare them for death. And James 5:14 is given as a basis for this practice. But James has in mind the healing of the sick person, not

death. This verse is not about preparing the person to die, but rather to raise the person up. And there's nothing magical about this oil. It is a dangerous and superstitious and unbiblical idea to think of any outward action like this as a means of forgiving sin. Our sin is forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, not through oil that has been consecrated by a priest.

Another interpretation of the anointing with oil in this verse is that it is medicinal. It's possible to understand the oil in this verse as being used for medical purposes. For instance, in Luke 10:34 the Good Samaritan cares for the man who was beaten, and it says that he "bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine." The wine was used to cleanse the wounds, the oil was used to soothe and heal them. And it could be that this reference to oil in James 5:14 is somewhat similar to that.

But there's another interpretation, which I find more compelling, which is to view the anointing with oil here in a spiritually symbolic way. In the Old Testament anointing with oil was used as a way of indicating that a person or thing was being set apart for God. In Exodus 40, for example, there are instructions to anoint with oil everything in the tabernacle and also to anoint the priests with oil. The purpose was to set them apart for God's special use, and the anointing with oil was a vivid way of demonstrating that. This seems to be the general meaning in James 5, and also in Mark 6:13, which is the other place where anointing with oil is mentioned in connection with the sick. Jesus had sent out the twelve, and it says, "they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." The anointing signified that the person was being set apart for God's special healing care, and in James 5 the elders anoint the sick person with the same kind of symbolism. They anoint with oil "in the name of the Lord," setting the person apart unto the Lord.

The Prayer of Faith (verses 15)

In verse 15 we come to the prayer of faith. We have to be careful with this because we know that it can be mis-used and mis-applied. Verse 14 makes this statement that "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." And if we were to read that without an awareness of many other things the Bible says about sickness and suffering, it would be possible to apply this verse in dangerous ways—assuming that we just need to pray with enough faith, and then we're guaranteed the healing we're asking for.

Maybe you heard the tragic and confusing story from just a couple weeks ago—a family in California whose 2-year-old daughter died suddenly. And the family, along with their church, began praying for the child to be raised from the dead. This is

Bethel Church in Redding, California, a church that is well-known for their worship music, but is also teaching false doctrine. The pastor teaches that it is always God's will to heal.

But think of how harmful and wrong that teaching is. Certainly God is able to heal, and is certainly able to raise people from the dead, as we read in Scripture that He has done so. But it is also abundantly clear that it is NOT always God's will to raise the dead or heal the sick.

The health, wealth and prosperity teaching (and Bethel Church in Redding is even on the fringe of that movement) . . . this kind of teaching entices people to put their hope in physical health rather than putting their hope in our sovereign and good God, who may choose to heal or may choose not to heal, but either way He is working for the good of His children.

So as we come to this verse we need to be careful not to think of this as an automatic way to be healed. God can and does choose to heal. But not always. We know that not all prayers for healing result in healing. We know that from experience. We also know that from God's Word. For instance, Paul's thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (verses 7-9).

The point of James 5 is that even though God is never obligated to heal, He does respond to prayers of faith with healing. It does happen. There are times when the grace is given for this prayer of faith to be prayed, and the result is miraculous healing. It's nothing we can manufacture. But it is something that God can and will do, according to His sovereign plans.

There are various viewpoints and discussions about the meaning of this prayer of faith in verse 15. The best I'm able to understand it, and the most compelling interpretation that I've come across, is that in unique situations God grants a gift of faith so that the elders pray in such a way that the person *is* healed. Again, this is not something that is in our control. It's not something that can be manufactured. But we are to pray, and we are to pray boldly, knowing that He is able to heal. We are to pray according to God's will, submitting to His sovereign plans, trusting that He knows best and He will do what is best. And in certain situations He will heal.

Now, look at the last statement in verse 15, "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Notice the *if*. He says, "*if* he has committed sins" because not every sickness is connected with sin. Some sickness is connected with sin, and we should probe our hearts and confess our sin when we're in midst of some affliction. Could God be disciplining me in some way right now? How might

He be wanting to rebuke me or expose my sin through this sickness?

But sickness does not necessarily mean that you have some unconfessed sin in your life. We remember the man who was born blind and the disciples asked Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind.” And Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:2-3). Therefore James says, *if* the person with a physical illness has committed sins, then by God’s grace through the prayer of faith, this person will not only be healed of the physical ailment, but will also be forgiven of the sin.

This is important, because our focus is drawn to the Person through whom we are forgiven. It’s certainly not the elders or any other church leader or minister who can forgive sins. There’s nothing in the oil that can forgive sins. But it’s Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the sinless Lamb of God, who died on the cross in the place of sinners and then rose from the grave! It’s through Him, and through Him alone, that we can be forgiven. The person who confesses their sin and turns from it, and puts their hope in Jesus Christ, will be forgiven. And that is the best news you will ever hear! As exciting as physical healing may be, having your sins forgiven is far more astounding and glorious. The sins that you have committed against God can be forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Confession and Prayer (verse 16a)

And now we move to verse 16 as James now talks about confession of sin. When I read this verse I picture the various small groups and Bible studies of this church. I especially envision those times when men are gathering with other men and women are gathering with other women, sharing from the heart about the sins that we’re facing in life. Confessing sins of anger, pride, selfishness, lust, greed . . . And praying for one another that we would look to the cross and find forgiveness and grace to live holy lives. We each need to have relationships in which there can be mutual confession and prayer.

Let me ask you this: When you’re struggling with a sin in your life, who do you share that with? You don’t need to share it with everyone. That’s not what this text is saying. But you do need to share it with someone. You need to have someone in your life—hopefully a few people in your life—whom you trust, who are spiritually mature, who will not minimize your sin but will speak the truth in love to you and help you confront that sin and pray for you as you fight the fight of faith.

I want to encourage all of you this morning, and admonish you to confess your sins to one another. Is there any hidden sin in your life? Is there a secret sin that you've been justifying in your mind even though you know deep down that it's wicked? You need to confess it to the Lord, and you need to confess it to other believers. Because as long as you keep it hidden you are putting yourself in extreme danger. That's right where Satan wants you to be, because you are so weak on your own and so susceptible to sin's lies. But when you bring those sins into the light, then there's power to overcome them, by God's grace.

It's important that we consider how we ought to confess our sin and to whom we ought to confess it. We first confess our sin to the Lord. Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12). In Psalm 51 we find an example of confession. In verse 1 David says, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." And in 1 John 1:9 we're given the promise, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We confess, first and foremost, to God. That's the vertical confession that needs to be a continual part of our lives.

But confession should also have a horizontal dimension. As James tells us, we also need to confess to one another. This is God's design for the church. We are to serve one another, bear one another's burdens, admonish one another, encourage one another and build one another up, exhort one another. And part of the one another fabric of the church is confessing to one another and praying for one another.

And it's important to think about who you're going to confess to. Don't make hollow confessions to immature or apathetic believers just so you can feel good about confessing your sin. Go to someone who is going to take your sin seriously. Go to someone who is going to give you wise counsel. Go to someone who will hold you accountable. Go to someone who will pray for you.

Also give some thought to how you confess your sin, because how you confess your sin will reflect how you perceive your sin. We need to realize how heinous our sin is in the eyes of God. It is detestable, no matter how we might try to minimize it. Jerry Bridges wrote a book entitled, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*, and he discusses sins like anxiety and frustration, discontentment, unthankfulness, lack of self-control, impatience and irritability, judgmentalism, envy, sins of the tongue, worldliness. Are you wrestling with any of those sins in your life? Confess those sins to other believers who will recognize that yes, those are serious offenses against our holy God, and who

will love you and encourage you to fight those sins. Let us be a confessing people and a praying people.

Elijah's Prayer (verses 16b-18)

Next James gives us an example to inspire us. There's the statement at the end of verse 16, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." And then he tells us about Elijah's prayer. "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit." James stresses here that you don't have to be some kind of spiritually elite person in order for God to work powerfully through your prayers. Certainly Elijah was viewed as a spiritual giant, but James reminds us that he had "a nature like ours." In other words, as a believer (as a "righteous person") God could choose to work through your prayers just as powerfully as He worked through Elijah's prayers.

The story that James recounts is from 1 Kings 17-18. There's a lot that happens in those chapters. At the beginning of chapter 17 Elijah says to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1). After that the Lord told Elijah to hide by the brook of Cherith, where he drank from the brook and the ravens brought him bread and meat. And then the Lord sent Elijah to Zerephath, where there was the miracle of the widow's flour and oil which never ran out, and then there was the even more spectacular miracle of the widow's son being raised to life. Then in chapter 18 we read of the famous encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, when God sent down fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice and showed everyone who the true God is. And just after that we see a picture of Elijah praying for the rain to come. It says, "Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees" (1 Kings 18:42). And then after sending his servant seven times to check for clouds, finally he saw a little cloud in the distance. "And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain."

What an inspiring story of prayer this is! What an inspiring example of a man of prayer. Elijah depended upon the Lord. His desire was that God would be seen for who He really is.

Saving the Wanderers (verses 19-20)

"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." James gives us some huge

incentive here to go after the wanderers. He mentions those who wander from the truth, and then he shows us how weighty a thing it is to bring back the wanderers. Look at how he describes it. He will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. It seems odd that the subject of these verbs is the fellow-Christian. It's the fellow-Christian who saves the wanderer and covers a multitude of sins. How can that be? It's because God uses means. Only God can save. Only God can forgive sins. But God uses various means to bring us to faith and to keep us believing. And one very important tool that He uses is other believers.

How do we bring back the wanderers? The sad truth is that we won't always be successful. Unfortunately, there will be some who wander from the truth and will not heed the warnings of those who love them and plead with them to return. And if the wanderer persists in their wandering, it may end up revealing that they never were truly a believer. 1 John 2:19 says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." That is a reality. There can be folks who appear to be Christians . . . they make a profession of faith and participate in the life of the church, but then they begin to wander. And they continue to wander, further and further from the truth. Their lifestyle strays further and further from God's good path that He has instructed us to walk upon. And if a wanderer continues on that trajectory, and there's no repentance, if they never return, then the reality is that they were probably never truly born again in the first place.

But we seek out the wanderers with the hope that these individuals are truly born again. They've slipped into certain patterns of sin. They've become apathetic. But our hope is that through God's appointed means of using His people to rebuke and restore . . . our hope is that the wanderers will respond and return.

What makes this so difficult is that we're trying to reach out and help individuals who, in many cases, don't want to be helped. That's part of their wandering. They've become calloused to the Holy Spirit. They've put distance between themselves and other believers. They've insulated themselves from accountability. But, nonetheless, we must pursue one another and ask each other the hard questions. When someone hasn't been at small group, or we haven't seen them at church in awhile, we need to call them. We need to see what's going on in their lives, how we can pray for them, how we can help them. If it turns out that they are, indeed, wandering from the truth, and are resistant to correction, we need to get some other people involved as well, following the Matthew 18 pattern. This may result in the person being removed from the membership of the church, if they do not repent of their sin. But

even then, the goal is repentance and restoration. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul instructs the church concerning a man who was living in sexual immorality. And he told the church that this man should be removed from among you. But he states the purpose: “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

This is always our goal as we seek out the wanderers. We want them to be saved from eternal death. We want their sins to be covered. We don't want them to make shipwreck of their faith. So be on guard concerning your own heart, lest you become a wanderer. And be on guard concerning those around you, lest they wander from the truth without anyone to admonish them and bring them back.

Now as I conclude this sermon, and also this sermon series through James, let me remind us of some of these things that we should be watching for, mainly in our own lives, but also as they relate to others who may be wandering. I'll summarize very briefly by listing four antitheses that James uses. In chapter 1 he contrasts hearing the word and doing the word. In chapter 2 he contrasts dead faith and active faith. In chapter 3 he contrasts wisdom from below and wisdom from above. And in chapter 4 he contrasts friendship with the world and friendship with God. The next time you read the letter of James I hope you'll think of these stark contrasts that he draws, and I trust you'll be convicted and encouraged in your faith. James is a letter that challenges us to have a real and active faith, and I pray that God will continue to use the many exhortations in this letter to spur us on in the fight of faith—that we would experience joy even in the midst of trials, that we would show no partiality, that we would tame our tongues, that we would flee worldliness, that we would say “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that,” that we would not love riches, that we would be men and women of fervent prayer, and that we would bring back the wanderers.