

Beloved, we come to the end of the book of James. I trust that this has been an enriching journey for us to have gone through the study. For me, as I was talking to the elders this morning, in many ways I have been surprised at the range of issues and the depth with which they are addressed.

To conclude, and rightly if you understand the book of James, which all of us do to some degree hopefully than we did before, we conclude with “Body Life”. This is James 5:13-20. Join me in reading this portion.

*“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 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.*

*“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.”*

If you drop all the way back to the beginning of this letter you will recall that James wrote the letter to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion, and he made frequent comments throughout the letter referring to “my brothers.” I think that I am fairly safe to say that we have a tendency to read this letter, and any portion of the Bible, we have a tendency to read it as an individual, as an independent operator trying to make our way through life with spiritual faithfulness. We turn to the Word for instruction, and encouragement and guidance, and rightly so. When we read this letter or any portion of the Bible in this manner, we are very American, very individualistic. If we read it that way, there is considerable loss of understanding. Rather than reading the letter alone – what I am referring to now is a state of mind and not a physical [condition] – we need to read the letter as part of a closely knit fellowship of believers. We should, in fact, read the letter with the intention of fostering or strengthening the spiritual life of the fellowship and not only of our own lives. The prayer would be something like this: “Lord, give me what I need to bless others today and this week” and not, “Give me what I need” but letting the Spirit of God shift my focus so that instead of “Me” it is “Them” that in fact is at the forefront of my thinking and my heart’s desiring.

Taking up today the closing portion of the letter, we immediately meet this collective rather than individual context. Whether our life circumstances call for supplicatory prayer or songs of praise, the response is oriented to the company of believers. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, Romans 12:15, [we are to] *“Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.”* How powerful that call is, that expectation is that the events of our lives, the course of our lives, will be lived openly to and shared with others who are part of the body of Christ. Paul immediately after that goes on to say, *“Live in harmony with one another.”* What Paul has in mind by “harmony” if you read the entirety of the book of Romans and indeed if you read all of the letters that Paul wrote is not the sort of bland tolerance with a flavoring of good will that too often characterizes the relationships that we have within the church. As we conduct our lives together my observation is that we are very careful to leave everyone free to do as they want. We are very cautious about stepping into someone else’s “private space”, and ever challenging what they do, what they say, where they go or who they go with. I do not believe it is so much that we do not want to be in close contact with others as that we fear and resent criticism, even from those we love and who love us. We shield our pride inside the demand for privacy, the privilege of living outside the reach of other people’s evaluations. What I find peculiar about this dance we engage in, a dance that allows never to come too close to anyone else and allows us to preserve large areas of privacy in our lives which no one is able to touch or address without specifically our personal invitation is that if you go to Face Book... Huh? Suddenly these private souls who

tremble and withdraw from face to face contact will spread over that electronic page stuff that I would hesitate to tell my wife! So something is amiss.

It has long been observed that God has made us social creatures. We in fact both desire and need the bonds of close fellowship with others. Of course, being fallen creatures that closeness can often be dangerous.

In contrast to our day Paul saw the relationships shared amongst believers not as independent but as interdependent. James is by no means alone in this observation. We see this in the opening verses of Romans 12:1-2. You are probably familiar with these. I encourage you to memorize them; they are powerful statements from Scripture. Paul says, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers – there again is that collective term – by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* I think it fair to say that people tend to read those two verses individualistically, that is, separately, that is, not only separated from anyone else, but separated from what follows. We take them up as a challenge and an opportunity for our personal journey of maturity in the faith, but it is a solo journey. However, listen to what Paul says immediately after those two verses:

*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For – in your Bible you probably have a little paragraph break, you may even have a little title [indicating] change of topic. Remember that those breaks and those titles are not part of the inspired Word of God. They are editorial insertions to help us. In this case, not helpful. Why do I say that? Listen to this in its continuity – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...”*

It is fair to say that in this description, and you pick up the metaphor, the extended analogy, that there is a sense in which David is as close and intimate to me as my arm is to my body. We are members of the same body together: that is the intent of God.

We return to James 5:13-20, which is the conclusion of the letter and we find ourselves at this same frame of reference. James is telling his readers that they need to orient their lives to one another. Instead of sitting; Nini would you turn and look to Petrina and Caleb would you turn and look to Jon or Lindsay. Turn your bodies. If you were to walk into a room and you saw two people sitting in that manner, what would you instantly conclude: they don't get along! They are not happy to see each other. Well, how do we live our lives? Do our lives express a together orientation which says, “I am eager, ready, glad to embrace you,” or do our lives say, “Maybe...”?

A suffering heart, James says, is to pray. But as the following verses indicated, which James has written in 13-20, that prayer is to be oriented towards others, not just to God, but to others in the body, seeking comfort in the community which gathers together as ready to share in the suffering and to share in the celebrations of their lives. It is said a cheerful heart is to share its joys with others by way of praise to God. This is beautifully illustrated in parable that Jesus told and is recorded for us in Luke 15:8-10. You will recognize this parable. The point of the parable is not what I am going to say right now, but I want to make a point out of the parable. This is the parable. *“What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of the coins, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?”* – now this is the point: what does she do when she finds that coin? What Jesus says is that when she finds it – *she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have*

*found the coin that I had lost.”* She instantly turns the finding of that coin into a community celebration, saying my gladness I readily share with you; come share with me in the gladness of this moment. What a happy thought!

It is said sorrows shared are halved, joys shared are doubled. Our lives, beloved, our lives are diminished if we shut ourselves away from the company of the beloved and live in emotional isolation. Some of you know enough about me to know that those words are not easily said from my lips. I am by nature a hermit and by spiritual calling a monk and only under the overwhelming force of God’s insistence do I stand in the midst of His people and talk. It also has something to do with my wife, who insists that I would be a socially graceful being and conduct myself in a manner that pretends to be nice. But it is true, isn’t it! For I have walked alone enough times to know how dark the shadows can get and how thin the joys become so that the soul is starved and needs the fellowship of the body. If I do, so do we all.

James continues in verse 14, saying, *“If someone is sick, let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”* There is something we need to do and I want to take a little time now to make certain we understand that this portion of the teaching of God’s word has nothing to do with the primitiveness or the inadequacy of medical technology and knowledge. Long before James wrote, in the days of the kings of Judah there was a king named Asa. He was the great grandson of Solomon. In his old age we are told, he developed a disease in his feet. We are also told that he did not seek the Lord for a cure; all he did was call on the doctors. Now surely calling on the doctors is a normal thing to do. The significance of his choice of not calling on the Lord but calling on the doctors is what is written in a parallel to another choice in Asa’s life. Early in his life the kingdom of Judah, over which he ruled, was attacked by a million man army out of Egypt and what we would call Ethiopia. At that time Asa called on the Lord in absolute panic knowing that there was no way the resources of little Judah could possibly stand against this great army. The Lord heard his cry and they devastated that army. Now in his latter years a neighboring kingdom much smaller than that threatened to go to war with Judah. Asa does not call upon the Lord. Rather he pulls together all the gold and treasure that he can, most of it out of the house of God, and sends it off to the king of Syria, buying an allegiance so the Syrians will go down and pull the other army away and Judah would be saved. God sends His servant to talk to Asa. We read this in 2 Chronicles 16:7-9.

*“Because you relied on the king of Syria, and did not rely on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you. Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on the Lord, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”*

Regarding the disease in Asa’s feet the account goes on in 2 Chronicles 16:12 to say, *“...his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but sought help from the physicians.”* Now I want to assure you that the Word of God has no argument against good medical practices. If you read Isaiah the prophet and were to turn to Isaiah 38:21 you will find that there, after Isaiah has talked with king Hezekiah, has prayed with him, king Hezekiah has called on the Lord, Isaiah has received a word from God saying [Hezekiah] will be healed. How does the end of that story come to us? Isaiah says, *“Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.”* In that day it was a good medical practice. So let us understand what the issue here is as we look at James and the matter of prayer and the role of elders in responding to our physical needs. The issue is faith the believer’s conscious and deliberate dependence on the Lord in all the affairs of life. I think that for most of us, this is a matter of what we consider to be the dimensions of something. Think about this for a moment – I don’t wish to wound anybody here – but if you have a stroke or a heart attack, or you are involved in a serious accident, I am pretty sure that almost everyone in this room would instantly go to God in prayer, recognizing the extreme severity and great danger of those situations. Likewise too if you are not feeling well and you go to the doctor and you have the diagnosis, “I think you have cancer.” Prayer? Well these go on the Prayer Chain instantly, and rightly so. But if all I have is a cold or I have a little fever, then it is small enough so I can handle it on my own!

Now beloved, there is a reason that we do this sort of thing and I think this is the reason. Generally we put our faith for healing in medicine and medical practices. I am very deliberate in what I just said: we put our FAITH... in medicine and medical practices. When we do that it reflects a cultural practice of separating issues of material reality from spiritual reality. I can put it this way – perhaps it is a bit strong: doctors and nurses take care of bodies, pastors take care of souls. Beloved, that is a false distinction. It is simply false; it denies what scripture is at length driving home to our understanding. Curiously, if you follow medical practice, it is the medical community itself that has been saying to us, you know when it comes to healing the spiritual condition of the person makes a huge difference in terms of how well they respond to all the medical practices and medicines that we give to [the patients]. We also know, I think most of us do, don't we, that sometimes we get sick because our souls are sick, and that should not surprise us.

Our godless and humanist society remains resistant to the reality of a sovereign and personal God. Sadly so does the behavior of a lot of Christians, at least when it comes to bodily well-being and being healed. James point us to a reason for this. Affirming the healing power of prayer, James goes on directly to the matter of sin. Now I think we come to a more important issue.

Sin is soul sickness in its truest and most characteristic form. James says in 5:15-16, the power of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven. Ah, but we do not want sickness and sin to be closely related! Our resistance to recognizing that closeness is actually a resistance against what Jesus Christ Himself specifically states and demonstrates. I do not think we often think about this when we are observing these episodes of out of Jesus' life. In Matthew 9:5-7 we read this: Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. He has just been asked to heal a paraplegic. Instead He says, “Your sins are forgiven.” The Pharisees are in a fuss. What they are upset about is they say, “Who are you, a mere man, to forgive sins?” So Jesus' response is this, “*Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, rise and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...*” He then says to the paralytic, “*Rise, pick up your bed and go home.*” And the paralytic did; but notice this is not a parable just about healing. It is a parable about the interconnectedness of sin and sickness, recognizing that these are interwoven with each other and we need to respond to them on both levels, spiritual and physical.

Jesus' words therefore remind us that the power for bodily healing is no less ours through faith than the power of forgiveness. What are we told in the Lord's Prayer? Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us. How many of us are in the forgiving business? Perhaps if we took more seriously the fact that we are empowered by God to extend forgiveness to one another there would be a lot less sickness in the body, each of our bodies and the body as a whole.

It is important for us as we take up these matters that Jesus clear that He is talking about God's power. It is not our power. It reaches us by way of His mercy, not our command.

Just how this works is illustrated in reference to Elijah. Elijah's story is given to us in the Old Testament, I Kings 17. Here the issue is not physical sickness, it is a drought, as James reminds us. There is a terrible drought in the land and we are told in I Kings 17 that Elijah announced to the deeply pagan king Ahab that there will no rain until his, Elijah's, prayers call for it. If we reflect upon the larger context we know that the drought is God's action and Elijah is God's man. The question that then arises is, “Am I God's man? Is that who I am?” “Am I God's woman?” “Am I God's servant?” As I approach the issues of life, as I approach others, am I God's servant?”

Later on, we are told, Elijah prays and it rains. That is the lesson that James wants his readers to take home. Maybe our prayers! But what exactly is the lesson? James says two things here that we need to take note of. First he says the

prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Then he also says Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. He prayed fervently that it might not rain and for three years and six months it did not rain. So what is the lesson? Surely James is not contradicting the truth and wisdom of his older brother. What did his older brother Jesus say? Jesus said in the parable of the vine and the branches, *“I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from Me you can do nothing.”* So there is nothing here about an independent operation by Elijah or by anybody else. Elijah either gets his power directly from God or there is no power to be got! The prayer of a righteous person is not a source of independent and self-directed power in the world. James letter, however, is focused on the believer’s response to God’s grace rather than the believer’s dependency on that grace. The grace that runs throughout all of James’ letter is not, “Do you have faith?” The question that James is constantly putting forward to us is, “Do you have a true faith, a faith that acts.” You all know that from reading his letter. Then the question becomes not do you have faith as pick up the phone or walk into the doctor’s office, but do you have a faith that acts, that is that you call upon God? Or do we, like our secular neighbors go mindlessly about our business, or I should say heartlessly, the heart being the residence of faith, and simply operate like every other secular creature in town? The prayer of a righteous person is not a source of independent and self-directed power.

The focus here is not on Elijah’s faith in God, which is assumed, but on the example of Elijah as a man who acted on or by that faith. Notice again how James brings us into this little discussion. He begins by saying, *“Elijah was a man just like us.”* James wants his readers to understand, the Holy Spirit of God wants you and me to understand that Elijah was not some sort of demi-god or in our age, superhero. He is not somebody who has extraordinary powers that no ordinary little person could possibly have. What he was, was an ordinary little person who was plugged into God because he had a faith that prompts him to fervently pray and to draw his strength and his wisdom and his guidance from the Lord. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. So with us, if God directs us to pray for no rain, and if that is God’s plan, then we can pray and there will be no rain. Now I hope that nobody is dumb enough to be doing that right now [in light of the already current doubt!]. But if you are going to pray for rain, you must be certain that is what God wants. Ah!

When you read the account of Elijah you realize that Elijah was a lot like Jesus, as we are to be ourselves. What do we know about Jesus? Jesus says a number of things that are absolutely stunning regarding His relationship with the Father. In John 5:19 Jesus is quoted as saying, *“Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”* Jesus says the same thing again with greater emphasis in John 12:49-50, *“For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life. What I therefore say, I say as the Father has told me.”*

Beloved if I were to make application at this point, which is exactly what I am going to do, I am going to make application at this point! I would say this: we do not begin to spend enough time listening to God. We are action oriented people. We want to get things done. We want to solve problems. We do not want to wait until God tells us what to do. How long does it take before you have a clear leading from the Lord? I do not know how long it takes, because that would be individual, one by one, and whether or not consult with others in the faith and pray together and are in a nexus, a spiritual nexus—do you remember what Jesus said? Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am. So we have great decisions to make and do we gather together and pray? We face crises in our lives: do we gather together and pray? Or do we wall ourselves off and seek to walk in the strength of our own spirit until the end?

James closes his letter in verse 19-20, but I have skipped over something important. Jesus is the model for our lives. There are many aspects to that model. The heart of it is Jesus’ perfect submission and obedience to the Father. Perfect submission and obedience to the Father. At the heart of that submission and obedience was Jesus’ knowledge of the scriptures. Jesus knew the Word, and because He knew the revelation already given, Jesus was

able to listen and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the course of His daily life. There is a ton inside of that statement, understanding what Jesus set apart [from Himself] when He came [to earth] and became a man. Did He know everything knew? I categorically say no; He did not know everything that the Father knew, because if He did He would have been so different from us there would be no comparison whatsoever. He lived by faith and listening. He memorized the Word. We are told when He was a child He grew in stature and knowledge of the Word of God. He memorized so that in any situation He could call upon the revelation that was given. You and I could do it too: well you can do it. I am terrible at memorizing. So I read the Word over and over and over again. Consequently beloved – I am going to be really annoying right now; it is my gift! – I do not watch television, I do not track sports...What do I do with my time? Right! “But I am an American and I can do what I want to,” [the soul protests]. You are right. You can. And then you can talk it over with Jesus on the last day.

We have spoken often, and I will speak often again, about the decline of the church, its pathetic weakness; our inability to stand against the trends and cultural forces of our day, and as long as we continue to drink deeply from the fountains of secular culture and ignore, neglect, the resources that God has given us, the [resource of the Bible, the fellowship, and prayer], we will remain a pathetic and weak body. That is not God’s desire. I do not believe it is ours. Let us listen and be transformed by the Word of God.

Please pray with me: Father in heaven, we are about to take the Supper together. We desire that our hearts would be at the right place, ready, our Father, to remember Jesus paid a price for this meal that we do not comprehend; maybe someday in eternity we will begin to understand this act of love. Father forgive us that we live casually, that we live secularly, that we are almost afraid of being “too spiritual” when in fact, Father, we are so anemic in our spiritual lives we can scarcely stand. Have mercy upon us. Renew in us a right heart and a right mind. We come as sinners to the table, but not only as sinners; we may be dimly burning wicks, but Father, we know that the light is Jesus and we know that we are forgiven by His sacrifice. We take it to ourselves, giving thanks and being full of hope. In Jesus’ name. Amen.