

Pray James 5:13-20

James 5:13-20 Introduction

- There is a story attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson That goes as follows:
- A sailing ship was caught at sea in the midst of a violent storm. As the waves repeatedly hit the ship, water splashed up over the sides. The crew ordered the passengers to their quarters below, where they all sat terrified. After a time, one daring man, contrary to orders, crept to the deck.
- He slowly made the dangerous passage to the pilot house and saw the steersman. He was at his post, lashed to the wheel and holding it unwaveringly. The pilot saw the panicked watcher and gave him a reassuring smile.
- The daring passenger went back below and passed on a word of comfort: "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."

- In every circumstance of life, God invites us into His presence to pray.
- His smiling face gives us a comforting point of reference when life's storms seem utterly chaotic.
- In the previous passage of James, there were repeated references to patience, waiting and steadfastness.
- James assured us that the Lord's coming is at hand and called us to look at Job as an example of perseverance.

- In this passage we find seven distinct references to prayer.
- The repetition is there for a reason: James would remind us to pray.
- It's in prayer that we find comfort, strength and forgiveness.
- Moreover, it is prayer that propels all godly activity and drives all forms of ministry forward.

- We may ignore prayer because it does not seem effective.
- We may not see the results we desire when we desire them.
- Prayer, we must admit, is somewhat humiliating, because it reminds us that we are powerless, weak and needy before God.
- Jesus said it clearly when he said, "without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

- While prayer might seem like a waste of our precious time, in reality all our other activity may be a waste of time if we do not surround it with prayer.

Prayer is powerful because God is powerful and God invites us to pray.

James 5:13-20 Outline

- We should pray at all times. 5:13
- We should pray for the sick. 5:14-15
- We should pray for one another. 5:16a
- Prayer is powerful. 5:16b
- Prayer is for all of us. 5:17-18
- We can all turn sinners toward God. 5:19-20

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We should pray at all times. 5:13

- Before we consider this verse, we should consider the possible outcome of our various circumstances.
- When we are severely afflicted, we may blame God for the affliction and grow bitter as a result. “God is cruel.”
- When things go well, we may forget God and just mosey along without ever giving Him a second thought. “God is unnecessary to us.”
- In this verse, James suggests we should seek God’s face regardless of present circumstances, whether they are bad or good.

- The word James uses for suffering in the verse is a very generic word.
- It can mean anything from physical suffering to sustaining various afflictions, to hardship to simply being miserable.
- We should submit all of our troubles to prayer.
- And what should we do when we are cheerful?

- We should “psalm.” The word “sing” is not needed in the original, as in “sing psalms.”
- So when times are good and when times are bad, James says the right thing to do is see our circumstances as good reason to turn to God.
- We can cry out in anguished prayer or we can praise Him; both are perfectly valid. The point is we turn to Him.

We should pray for the sick. 5:14-15

- James is not implying anything superstitious here, or guaranteeing the results, just encouraging his churches to pray for the sick.
- He recommends that the sick person calls for “the elders of the church.”
- This is not a ministry reserved for the apostles in the early church or somebody who travels around with a special healing ministry.

- Nor does he point us to a special shrine in a far off location where apparitions have been seen or miracles are known to occur regularly.
- Every church, but especially those in the church’s leadership, “the elders” should make it a point to pray for the sick.
- In this case the assumption is that the sick man can’t even get out of bed.

- Now as to the oil, don’t get too caught up in the details.
- Oil in the ancient world was used both for medicinal and for ritual purposes, so it is not an either-or thing.
- Further, when Jesus’s disciples prayed for healing in the Bible, sometimes they used oil and sometimes they didn’t.

- On at least two occasions Jesus used His own spit and achieved miraculous results, but I wouldn’t recommend that method for us.
- We can certainly use oil if we so desire, but even then, it doesn’t have to be special consecrated olive oil from Israeli olives.
- Nor does it have to be perfumed, or come in a special holy-looking religious flask.

- Also regarding the sins mentioned in v.15, James is allowing for the possibility that sin has played a part in the sickness in question, but that is obviously not always the case.
- Job's friends made the mistake of thinking that Job's sin caused his calamities when they really hadn't. As a result, they looked stupid.
- Sickness is a good time, however, to make sure that we are in a right place with God.
- On Monday Sofi C. was in the hospital (again), and she asked for Jeff Blackwell, Paul Velázquez and me to come and pray for her.
- So we went, and by the time she got settled in a room and they let us in, many were there.
- I think in the end we had eight guys gathered around her bed in the ICU at Riley (though I think that was bending the rules) – all praying for her together.

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We should pray for one another. 5:16a

- Prayer and confession go together.
- Moreover, confession brings people together.
- It is especially necessary when we have sinned against someone and this has brought tension into the relationship.
- Confession is the way to restored fellowship.
- But we should also have those with whom we can talk about those private sins and temptations of our hearts.
- Deitrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship* talks about the potentially damaging consequences of secret sin:
 - “The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community.”
- Therefore, it can be extremely helpful to have a person or two with which we can share our private struggles. Small accountability groups can be very useful for this practice.
- They work best when they are people of the same gender: men with men, women with women.
- Confession and prayer can be remarkably freeing in such an environment.
- And, as Bonhoeffer goes on to point out in that same section, confession removes all semblance of superficial religion.
- Confession allows us to have truer fellowship, by allowing people to understand the things we deal with even when we are alone.

Prayer is powerful.

5:16b

- The translation of this verse is a bit awkward.
- Here it is in a few other translations:
 - The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (ESV)
 - The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (NIV)

- The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working]. (Amplified)
- Don't let that word "righteous" scare you.
- The righteous are all of those who are in a right relationship with God.
- If you have received the righteousness of Christ, then you are right before God.
- It's His righteousness credited to your account that makes you one of the righteous, and qualifies you to have an ministry of effective prayer.

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Prayer is for all of us. 5:17-18

- Elijah is one of the all-stars of the Old Testament.
- He is the first of the great prophets to arise during the period of the Jewish kings.
- But Elijah he was just a guy – just a normal, though godly, guy.
- This word that James uses for "a nature like ours" is the same one Paul and Barnabas use when a group of pagans in the book of Acts want to offer sacrifices to them. (Acts 14:15)
- Elijah could rise to the heights of faith and sink into the depths of despair.
- He could be outstandingly brave and then later run for his life.
- He could show unselfish concern for others, and then later be filled with self-pity.
- Elijah was human, but, like us, Elijah was right with God.
And Elijah learned how to pray.
- The phrase "he prayed earnestly" is literally, "with prayer he prayed."
- This is kind of Jewish way of saying, "He really prayed – plain and simple. He just did it."
- Sometimes, as here, his prayers were answered quite remarkably, but not always.
- In 1 Kings 19:4 we read one prayer of Elijah's that God simply refused to answer.
- Elijah never died!!
- One day some time later, the Lord sent a fiery chariot and took him straight into heaven.
- You can read about that in 2 Kings 2.
- James's point is that each one of us can have a ministry as useful as Elijah's if we will only learn to pray. When Elijah prayed, he prayed – and we too can develop that practice.
- Since Elijah's time, others have learned to do it too – even to the point of bringing rain to end a drought as a result.
- There is a fascinating story in: *The New Book of Lists: The Original Compendium of Curious Information*. It is itemized as Unusual Lawsuits #38, and is entitled: *Pray for Rain*
 - In hopes of ending a drought in upstate New York in the 1880s, a Presbyterian minister named Duncan McLeod organized a mass prayer session to take place on a Saturday in August. At noon, people throughout the area stopped their activities and prayed for rain. By one o'clock, clouds had appeared; by two, a gusty wind was blowing. By three, the temperature had dropped 20 degrees; and by four, a thunderstorm had arrived. The storm, which dropped almost two inches of rain, washed out a bridge and completely destroyed a barn, which burned to the ground after being struck by lightning. As it happened, the barn

belonged to Phineas Dodd, the only farmer in Phelps, New York, who had refused to join the collective prayer. Many thought that Dodd had been a victim of divine justice, but Dodd had other ideas: When he heard that Reverend McLeod was accepting congratulations for ending the drought, he sued the minister for \$5,000 to cover the damages to his property. The minister was put in a difficult situation: After repeatedly telling his followers that God had answered their prayers, he could hardly back down and say that the storm was just a coincidence. Fortunately for McLeod, his lawyer was able to convince the judge that the mass prayers had requested only rain. The thunder and lightning had been a bonus provided by God for which McLeod and his parishioners were not responsible.

We can all turn sinners toward God. 5:19-20

- Elijah's prayers were not offered to get "his own human will done in heaven even as it was on earth." He did not manipulate God.
- Elijah's heart was broken with the lostness of the nation in which he lived.
- His heart matched God's own heart and therefore, God was eager to answer Elijah's prayers.

- When we see people wandering away from the truth, we should consider how the Lord might use us in the process of drawing them back toward Himself.
- Hesitatingly, looking at this passage we might ask, "Are these utterly lost people or true Christians in the process of drifting away from their faith that James is referring to here?"
- The correct answer is, "It doesn't matter."

- If they are still utterly lost, the Lord wants them to hear and understand the gospel.
- If they are drifting believers, the Lord wants them to have a stronger and more stable relationship with Himself.
- Either way, we can pray and we can prayerfully talk to them about their faith, their behavior, or whatever the issue might be.

- And Christ's blood will cover all of their sins.
- As we minister to others, we are also made more conscious of the grace the Lord has shown us.
- A hymn by Augustus Toplady says:
 - The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Savior's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view

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James 5:13-20 Conclusions

- James has closed out his letter in his typical straightforward style, drawing our attention to perhaps the most vital ministry anyone can ever hope to have.
- Supremely gifted people are impressive, but uncommon.
- God gives gifts as He wishes, but the point James wants to drive home is that we can all learn to pray like Elijah.

- What's more, I believe the connection that James puts here between praying earnestly and winning souls is intentional.

- The two go hand in hand. Revival is empowered by prayer.
- Serious determined prayer is a strong indicator of serious determined Christianity.
- When Elijah prayed, he prayed. He didn't piddle around trying to sound spiritual.

- E. M. Bounds was a great Methodist minister after the Civil War and on into the early 20th Century. His books on prayer are among the greatest ever written.
- We will close with an excerpt from one of his messages entitled Elijah the Praying Prophet:
 - Where are the Elijahs in the church of the present day? Where are the men of like passions as he, who can pray as he prayed? We have thousands of men of like passions, but where are the men of like praying as he was? ... Elijah prayed really, truly and earnestly. How much of praying there is at the present time which is not real praying, but is a mere shell, shucks, and mere words! Much of it might be termed non-praying.
 - The world is full of such praying. It goes nowhere, avails nothing, it brings no returns. In fact, no returns nor results are expected. ... So in praying, we must pray. Truth and heart reality, these are the core, the substance, the sum, the heart of prayer. There are no possibilities in prayer unless we really pray in all simplicity, reality and trueness.

- E. M. Bounds knew something about prayer.

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