

Series James

This Message Faith Without Fervent Prayer is Dead

“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective”

Scripture James 5:13-20

Today is our last session on the Epistle written by James. I hope our journey has been informative and beneficial.

It is fitting that the last verses in the letter be on the subject of prayer. This is the ninth topic covered by James in the letter. Another copy of the outline appears at the end of this message as a reminder. The title today is “Faith Without Fervent Effectual Prayer is Dead.”

Read James 5:13-20

Prayer is the obvious theme of verses 13-18. The noun or verb form of the word “prayer” occurs in every verse. These verses imply the need for believers to pray in every circumstance in life. Times of trouble, happiness, sickness, and sinful behavior — all are occasions when prayer is appropriate.

The word translated “trouble” is a general term which is sometimes translated “suffering.” It can refer to all sorts of problems that are encountered in life: spiritual, physical, emotional, financial, or relational. James touched on these topics in the letter. Whatever the trouble may be, whatever the concerns of the believer may be, according to James the first response should be prayer. Prayer is the acknowledgement that we are totally dependent on divine help.

James knew that his readers were inclined to grumble and complain, and to quarrel and fight, and to lash out at and even to curse others. These behaviors were mentioned previously in the letter. Too many of the readers had “short fuses.” This is why James gave the instruction in chapter 1 to be “slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (*James 1:19*). In place of the typical human reactions to the troubles of life, James wanted his readers to make prayer the automatic response to their troubles.

Next, James instructed his readers to “sing songs of praise” when they were happy. The word “happy” is a general word referring to any cause for cheerfulness and contentedness. James was indicating that “songs of praise” are a form of prayer, a way to express gratitude. Praise is the acknowledgement that God has provided help.

Verse 13 is a recapitulation of themes from chapter 1. That’s where we learned that the trials which test our faith are allowed by God as a means for us to develop spiritual maturity. Prayer will enable the believer to persevere when under trial. Believers must also recognize that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” and bestowed on those who are the chosen ones of God. The point here is that we must, in every situation, learn to live with a God-ward, God-dependent focus.

Too many believers turn to prayer as a last resort, after they have exhausted their abilities and resources to try to fix their problems. It may indeed be necessary for us to work hard to reach our goals, but we shouldn’t do anything until we’ve prayed and sought “the wisdom that comes from heaven” (*James 3:17*). Only then can there be confidence that we are doing God’s will.

“Sickness” is another circumstance in which prayer is needed. Like the words “trouble” and “happy,” the word “sick” also has a general meaning. Traditionally most commentators and Bible translators have understood verse 14 to refer to physical sickness and healing. However, this may not be the best way to understand the word “sickness.” A number of commentators insist that this passage refers to spiritual restoration. They allege that the word “sick” can and should be translated “weak” or “incapacitated,” referring to the spiritual condition of believers who are no longer following the ways of God. These commentators insist that verse 14 is instruction to those individuals who are out of fellowship with God and at odds with other believers; that they are believers who need to repent of their ways, be forgiven of their sins, and restored to spiritual vitality.

The emphasis in verses 14, 15, and 16 is on the forgiveness of sins, and reinforces the spiritual restoration view. What we have is a major difference in interpretation about these verses. The prayer offered in faith is either the guarantee of forgiveness of sins or the guarantee of the physical healing of the sick person.

Perhaps James intended to be ambivalent about his words. Perhaps in bringing his letter to its conclusion he deliberately linked physical illness with sin. However, if this was the case, his words would not be a summary of previous instructions, but would be introducing new thoughts. Let me explain why I think this is unlikely.

Throughout this letter, James has kept his focus on the improper spiritual attitudes and behavior patterns of his readers. There have not been any previous references to their physical well-being. The emphasis throughout the letter has been on the spiritual consequences of their worldly attitudes and their lack of trust in God and lack of obedience to God.

Thus, it seems logical that His closing statements would be consistent with the main topics he had previously presented. Throughout the letter the focus has been on the healing of personal relationships with God and with other believers. In my opinion, James, in these closing sentences, is trying to get his readers to repent, and to return to the kind of God-pleasing relationships and behaviors expected of faithful, dedicated followers of Jesus.

Verse 16 begins with the word, “therefore,” indicating a close connection to the preceding verses. Believers were to “confess their sins to each other and pray for each other.” The result would be the healing of relationships. Actually the healing would be the final step in a sequence of four steps. Verse 15 states that prayer will make “the sick person well,” “the Lord will raise him up,” “he will be forgiven,” so that there “may be healing.” The emphasis is on spiritual change, not physical. The objective is improved relationships with God and with other believers.

James then sets forth an important principle: “the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” The key to answered prayer is the righteousness of the pray-er. In the context of these verses, the “righteous man” is the man whose sins have been confessed and forgiven. “Confession of sins to one another” would represent a 180 degree turn from what had been happening among the believers. They had been grumbling and criticizing one another, slandering and competing against each other, and when they did pray, James said that they had wrong selfish motives. James was encouraging them to practice Christ-like behavior — to be humble toward others and to be concerned about the well-being of others.

James reminded his readers of an Old Testament prophet who was known for his miracle-producing prayers. James mentioned just one example of Elijah's prayers, the one involving a long drought and the renewing rain. This episode began when Elijah declared to King Ahab that it would not rain on the land of Israel again except at his word (*1 Kings 17:1*).

James could have mentioned other miracles performed by Elijah. During the drought, there was a continuous supply of food provided for Elijah and the widow at Zarephath. Later, when the widow's son died, Elijah prayed earnestly and the boy was restored to life. There was also the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, in which Elijah prayed and God answered dramatically with fire upon the water-drenched altar.

In each situation, God answered Elijah's prayers in spectacular fashion. All of the miracles were undeniably beyond human ability. James used Elijah as his example for one main reason, which is stated at the beginning of verse 17: Elijah "was a man just like us." James wanted his readers to understand that incredible answers to prayer were within their reach. There were only two requirements for effectiveness in praying: the pray-ers had to be righteous and they had to pray earnestly. In other words, James was urging his readers to repent and get back into close fellowship with God.

If I could pick out one passage from the letter to highlight the changes wanted by James, it would be these words from chapter 4: "Submit yourselves to God. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ... Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up" (*James 4:7-10*).

The Jewish background believers who received this letter had drifted away from their spiritual connection with God and were following the ways of the world. God was not near to them because they were not near to God. They were in need of spiritual cleansing and purification. That has been the message of James throughout the letter. That is the summary message of verses 13 through 18.

Before we let go of this passage, I would like to take another look from another perspective. Three kinds of prayer are mentioned in these verses. First, each individual believer is responsible to pray for himself/herself. That's the thrust of the question in verse 13: "Is any one of you in trouble? Let him pray." In other words, the response of every believer when confronted with problems should be prayer. Unfortunately, it is easy for us, just like it was easy for the believers in the 1st Century, to become stoic and determined to "tough it out" on our own or to become angry and defiant, but James called for personal prayer as the immediate and most appropriate way to handle adversity.

Early in chapter 1 James reminded his readers that God would respond with whatever wisdom and help they needed when dealing with adverse circumstances, but only if the person believed and did not doubt. James stated that the person with doubts about God's willingness or ability to help was "double-minded" and "unstable" (*James 1:6-7*). The only way for believers to receive help in their circumstances was for them to have the appropriate attitude of trust in God.

This meant that they had to submit themselves to God and maintain a tight relationship with Him. Only then would they have confidence that God would be with them and would guide them through their troubles. Throughout the letter James taught that believers who relied on God for help and did not rely on their own schemes and strength in troublesome circumstances would have a sense of joy and rest and peace in their lives.

Second, there was the need for church leaders to pray over those who recognized their spiritual deficiencies. James wrote, "Is any 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." As I stated earlier, it is my opinion that the sick person is a spiritually needy believer. When spiritually deficient believers are ready to acknowledge their drift away from the ways of God, then they are expected to initiate contact with the elders. Such believers would have to acknowledge the worldliness of their thinking and behavior, recognize that they had given in to temptations and the selfish desires of the heart, recognize that God had not been sought for guidance, and that they had become enemies of God (*See James 4:1-4*).

For believers who recognized their drift from the Lord, James' exhortation was simple: 1) seek out leaders who have a pastoral ministry in the congregation; 2) submit themselves to the prayers of the leaders; 3) confess the sins that led to

their separation from the Lord; and 4) accept God's offer of forgiveness. According to James, "the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven."

The fact that the "out-of-fellowship" believers would be willing to appeal to the elders for spiritual help would be an expression of faith and a turn away from self-sufficiency. The fact that the elders were the ones called would be an expression of submission to authority because the elders represented Christ in the Church. It would be the privilege of the elders to welcome back into the church fellowship the repentant believer.

James gave one more instruction about who should be involved in prayer. Everyone in the fellowship was expected to pray for every other believer. Prayer by everyone for everyone would be the basis of rebuilding unity in the Church, a quality that was sadly lacking among the recipients of the letter. James was greatly concerned about their spiritual well-being. He emphasized the need for humility, cooperation, impartiality, love, and peace. The goal of the letter is summed up in verse 16: reconciliation and close fellowship in which believers are willing to "confess their sins to one another," and to "pray for one another."

There is an important lesson in this passage for us. As members of the body of Christ today, it is important that we share our struggles and needs and spiritual concerns with one another. Our goal is fellowship that is spiritually strong. In a previous message I used the illustration of embers in a fire pit. Scattered they quickly become cold, but gathered close together they generate a lot of heat. For our own good, we must not distance ourselves from others. As believers, we must be close-knit if we are to bear each other's burdens and draw strength and encouragement from one another. And for the good of our witness to the world, we must maintain close-knit relationships. We must act in God-pleasing ways or else non-believers will not be attracted to our faith.

We are ready now to consider briefly the last two verses of the letter. These verses are addressed to "my brothers." This is another example of the warm appeal that James has made throughout the letter. The "wanderer" in verse 19 is either a professing believer whose faith is not genuine or a sinning believer who needs to be spiritually restored. In view of the appeal to "my brothers," we can assume that James is concerned about the worldly believers who have drifted from the truth of the gospel. James' purpose in these closing verses is to encourage strong mature believers to make every effort to bring the wanderer back into fellowship with God and other believers.

James wrote this letter in a forthright, passionate, and typical Jewish style. He wanted to grab the attention of his readers and to make clear to them numerous ways in which their behaviors were sinful and displeasing to God. He wanted his readers, whom he loved dearly and referred to as “brothers,” to recognize the spiritual dangers of their worldly and ungodly behaviors. The concluding two verses of the letter state, in essence, "I have called you to repentance; now you do this for others. Point each other to righteousness just as I have instructed you."

Chapter 5 of the letter can be summarized with just a few words. When we are being oppressed:

- Don't resist!
- Be patient!
- Establish your hearts!
- Don't grumble!
- Don't swear!
- Pray!