

When We Pray

James 5:13-18

Introduction

Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray...

James 5:13-18

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Exposition

I. When We Should Pray (Vv. 13-16)

In these verses, James covers three circumstances in which we should pray. I appreciate the alliteration that Craig Blomberg provided in his commentary on these verses, so I will share it with you this morning. We are to pray in suffering, in sickness, and in sin. Now, to be sure, amid these comments about prayer, James cannot help but mention the need for believers to praise God in their times of happiness (their good times). To be sure, happiness might not have been the predominant emotion among the believers in James' audience, but for the few that were feeling happiness, they were praise God.

But based on the context of the whole letter of James, it seems better to assume that many of the people that James was writing to were facing different trials. James suggests this at the beginning of his letter (1:2-8), where he writes,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

So, James' congregation is facing various trials. Some are suffering persecution for their faith. Some are suffering sickness. And some, it appears, are suffering because of some sin that they have committed that has led them to become sick. In all these circumstances, James instructs his audience to pray.

So, what is prayer? To quote Eugene Peterson,

Prayer is language used in relation to God. It is the most universal of all languages, the *common language* (lingua franca) of the human heart. Prayer ranges in form from "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26 NRSV), to petitions and thanksgivings composed in lyric poetry and stately prose, to "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16), to the silence of a person present to God in attentive adoration (Ps. 62:1, 3).

In other words, prayer is what we do when we speak to God. Sometimes when we speak to God, we are making request. At other times, we are bearing our burdens, our complaints, and our laments. Then there are times when we are simply adoring God for who He is and what He has done. Thus, in its simplest form, prayer is what we do when we communicate to God. This is what James is instructing his suffering audience to do. They are to go to God in prayer with their suffering, sickness, and sin.

Now, there are some peculiar elements in these first few verses that we need to acknowledge and address before moving to the next section, but I do not want the main point of these verses to get lost here. The main thing that James is teaching his audience is that they should pray in these difficult circumstances. God is ready to hear our prayers. He is inclined to always commune with us because of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Our access to God has been earned for us. Thus, we ought not take for granted the blessing that we possess as children of God. We can and must come to Him with our suffering, sickness, and sin.

With this main point repeated, now, we can briefly look at some of the particularities of James instruction that might be confusing for us as 21st century readers. Let's look at the verses again:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

What we have in these verses is complex scenario where James is providing certain instructions. What do I mean by that? I mean that James begins with a common experience, sickness in the church, and gives instructions for that situation. When someone in the congregation is seriously ill, as insinuated by the passage ("call the elders" and "pray over them" suggest that the illness is serious enough that individual is homebound), they are to call upon mature believers in the church to anoint them with oil and pray for their healing.

The use of anointing oil is symbolic of consecration. In this case, the mature believers of the church (the elders) are consecrating the sick individual unto the Lord, praying for healing, that they might be raised up and restored to health. I believe this is a biblical practice that we as a church should continue to follow. We already do this when the occasion fits, and we will continue to do so as a church committed to obeying God's Word. In those moments, we anoint with oil and pray that God would heal, trusting that He will do so if He wills.

Now, this brings us to the question of what appears to be an unconditional promise of healing when we pray with faith. Some have taken these verses to mean that if you pray with enough faith, you will always be healed. The implication of such thinking is that if you are not healed then you have not had enough faith. But is that what the book of James is teaching here?

If we are going to answer this question carefully and correctly, then we must pay attention to the whole context of the book of James. And when we do this, I believe that what we will find is that in James 5:13-18, James is instructing his audience to pray with faith and bold assurance, acknowledging God's power, His ability to save and heal to the uttermost. I believe that is the basic meaning of all these verses: Pray to the God who not only hears you but who is able to do more than you can ask think or imagine. So, for some people in James' audience, they needed to be reminded of God's miraculous healing power that is related to the prayer offered in faith. For some, we simply do not pray because we do not believe that God is able. And James wants to correct such faulty thinking.

But does this mean that everyone that is prayed for will absolutely, unequivocally be healed in this life? Such a conclusion appears to be out of sorts with what James teaches about God's will in James 4:13-17, which reminds us that God is sovereign over our lives. It is His will that dictates our future, not our own.

Thus, if we allow James 4:13-17 to inform our understanding of the prayer of faith in James 5:15, then we can conclude that at the heart of the "prayer of faith" that leads to healing is an acknowledgment that healing in this life depends ultimately on the will of God. So, to offer the "prayer of faith" is to say, "Lord, I know you are able, and you can heal to the uttermost anyone, and Lord we are asking you do so in this moment, we are pleading with you to intervene and heal for your glory and their good. And we trust you in this matter. We know that you know best. We know that our lives are in your hands. We know that we will live or die according to your will. For you have numbered our days from before we were born. We humbly ask you to have mercy."

The prayer of faith is the prayer that acknowledges God is the giver and sustainer of life. The prayer of faith submits to God's will for us. It does not dictate to Him as if we were lord over him. No. The prayer of faith comes before God and says, "We are asking you to heal. We know you can. And if it's your will, it will certainly be done. Lord, please do it." This is the prayer of faith that James says will heal the sick.

Not that the sick will always be healed in this life according to our plans and wishes, but rather, that it is through the prayer of faith that we express our confidence in God's power and goodness and leave the future of our lives in His hands. Thus, we ought to pray such prayers with boldness and confidence in God's power while submitting to His authority and will in our lives.

Now, this leaves us with the question of what we are to think and do when we offer this prayer of faith and God does not answer according to what we have asked. We are going to cover this next week, so I would encourage to be back as we explore what we are to do and think when God's answer is "no."

But for now, we have looked at this idea of the relationship between prayer and healing and learned that we should pray for healing, making our request known to God, while acknowledging that He is God, and will always do what is best for His glory and our good.

But what about the way that James relates sickness to sin? What is going on here? This is the other particularity that we need to address in James 5. At the end of verse 15 through the rest of verse 16, James deals with the forgiveness of sin related to sickness. In brief, for many people in the first century, there was a belief that sickness was ALWAYS related to sin. If you recall in John 9, Jesus' disciples asked him if a particular man was born blind because of his own sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus corrected the error and said that his blindness was not about the sin of his parents or his own sin, but so that the glory of God might be seen in his life.

So, at times, the New Testament authors correct this misunderstanding about sickness being related to sin. But at other times, sickness can be related to sins committed by people. We do not have look much further than our passage last week in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul rebuked the Corinthians for the way that they were dishonoring God and their neighbors through their desecration of the Lord's Supper. And, in that context, Paul said that some of the people had become sick as a result of their sin.

So, we have this situation, in which, some people believed that all sickness and suffering was related to sin, and this is wrong. Such people are like Job's "friends" who could not fathom that a righteous person would suffer. There just had to be some other explanation. This is one of the reasons why the cross of Christ was so scandalous. How could the perfect Son of God, the Messiah, suffer? Yet, God's Word teaches us that righteous people suffer too.

Yet, here in James 5, James addresses the possibility that the sick person in the midst of the congregation was sick due to sin. And if that was the case, then that person needed to confess their sin, repent, and be forgiven. In fact, the promise is that they will be forgiven if they confess their sins.

Now, for us, the temptation at this point might be to start asking, “Am I sick because of some hidden sin in my life?” While I believe the impulse to be searched and known by the LORD in this regard is good and healthy, I do not think that is what James has in mind in James 5. I believe that James is dealing with a situation where the sin was already known. They were aware of their sin; they just were not coming to Christ for forgiveness.

So, while we should never rule out the biblical possibility that God would use sickness to discipline us, we also ought not believe that every instance of sickness is the result of sin. We have to maintain a balance here. And how do we maintain this balance? Through prayer. Coming to the LORD, unburdening our hearts. Confessing our sins. Asking for and receiving forgiveness always!

James has given this instruction to his audience that they might be stirred to pray with faith, no matter their circumstances. Whether it be suffering, sickness, or sin, God would hear their prayers because of Jesus. For, as James concluded, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” And who is the “righteous person?” It is the one who have placed their hope in Jesus Christ alone. We are heard by God because God heard Jesus when he was carrying out His priestly, atoning work on our behalf. When Jesus offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins in our place, God heard Him, and because He was heard, we are now heard as children of God.

II. How We Should Pray (Vv. 17-18)

To illustrate the impact of prayer, James draws upon the example of Elijah. Though Elijah was a prophet, James notes that he was a human being like the rest of us. In other words, there was nothing intrinsic to Elijah that made his prayer more effective. He was a righteous man, but he was not always a man of strong faith. At times, he was fearful. At times, he suffered. Thus, it is fitting that James draws our attention to Elijah.

What made Elijah great was the presence of God with Him. The same God is presence and working within us when we pray. Therefore, we also ought to pray with fervor, boldness, faith, and confidence in God that He will hear us and carry out His will in our lives and in the world.

Conclusion

What might you bring to God in prayer this morning? What might you ask someone to pray for for you?