

WHEN YOU PRAY

James 5:13-20

As we come to the end of the book of James, how do you feel? I think for many of us, whenever we read James we feel like we are going through the ringer. James is so intensely and relentlessly *practical* that we put it down feeling a bit battered and bruised. Does that describe you?

And at least in part, that is the point. James wants to pull the rug out from underneath any of our efforts to live anything but an authentically *Christian* life. His burden, from beginning to end, is to show that real faith issues in real works, that what we really believe is most clearly displayed in how we actually live.

Let's go on a bit of whirlwind tour through James and see how this has played out:

If we believe that God is good and sovereign then we will joyfully persevere through trials.

If we believe that God's Word is the perfect Law that brings freedom, we will trust in the transforming power of the Word and not our own outrage and anger.

If we believe that the gospel is about God's gracious favour upon the undeserving, then we won't play favourites in the church. We will treat all people with dignity and respect, even to lifting up the lowest among us.

If we believe that our words have immense creative or destructive power, then we will use our words with great care, seeking to speak words which build up rather than tear down.

If we believe that our life is a mist, we won't carry on as if we're in total control. If we believe that our money and stuff is fading away we won't hoard it up and spend it all on our own comfort.

True faith is not about empty claims. True faith bears fruit in the works we do and the words we say. And so it is entirely fitting that James ends his book with an exhortation to PRAY.

For, and here's the big idea for today:

THE PRIMARY WORK OF FAITH IS TO PRAY.

THE MOST PROFOUND WORDS OF FAITH ARE THE WORDS OF PRAYER

James' teaching comes to a climax as he calls us to pray. And also I hope we'll see that James is offering us a comfort in this call to pray. We feel battered and bruised at the end of James because he has systematically undermined any sense of confidence in our own selves, and our own strength. On our own we can't usher in the Kingdom, we can't produce God's righteousness, we can't tame our tongues, we can't change the world, we can hardly change ourselves. And yet here James gives us a final reminder that *we are not on our own*. We have access to the unchanging, eternal, powerful and good God in prayer. If we have been listening to James at all as we should, we should feel very much humbled. But that's exactly where James wants us. For when we learn to humble ourselves in prayer, then GOD can lift us up. Hopefully as we finish James you are finding yourself asking how on earth you can live out the intense and relentless teaching of James. Here James gives us the answer: PRAY.

And so today we are going to listen as James calls us to pray in different circumstances — in trouble, in happiness, in sickness, and in sin — which I reckon just about covers all of life. And in each case we will see how prayer is the answer to the particular temptations that arise in these different circumstances.

In Trouble

James 5:13,

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.

It seems as if “trouble” is the context of the Christians who James is writing to. Remember the way the letter begins, with instructions about how to respond to trials. And much of James’s letter is concerned with the temptations that arise in times of trial and trouble.

The great temptation in the face of opposition is to *fight back*. When we are under fire it can be tempting to fire back with our own angry words and violent actions. Or it can be tempting to suck up to the rich and successful, to get on side with those who have power and influence, to curry favour with those who might be able to do something for us, and to neglect those who need us to do something for them.

As James teaches about human anger in chapter 1, and showing favouritism in chapter 2, he’s really addressing the same temptation. That when we are in the midst of trial and trouble we desperately want to take matters into our own hands.

The prevailing wisdom, then and now, might be to fight fire with fire. But this doesn’t work, James says. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires he says in chapter 1 verse 20. And James starkly reminds us that such wisdom is not only unproductive, it is demonic. For when we fight fire with fire, then everything burns. How the devil loves to stoke the anger of Christians, to enflame our outrage, so that we and those around us will be consumed.

Now. You can imagine that the response to all of this could be: “do you just want us to sit around and do nothing?” “We have been forced to flee our homes and our lives are under threat, surely we have to do *something?!?*”

You might be thinking the same thing.

This year I have given two different sermons on the issue of politics and relating with human governments. And the uncomfortable, but unavoidable, dominant note of the NT when it comes to human authorities is that Christians must submit. Paul and Peter both encourage submission to hostile authorities who cause us trouble for trusting in Christ.

And after each of those sermons, several people expressed this very concern. Does this mean we do *nothing* in the face of opposition? Surely we have to do *something*?

Yes, of course we do! James takes anger and outrage and indignation and violence and hostility off the table. And he says instead: *pray*.

And if, like me, you sometimes catch yourself thinking that you want to do *more* than pray. I might gently suggest to us that we have not yet fully grasped just how powerful prayer really is.

For when we pray we tap into the power of the King of all Kings, and the name that is above every name; the one who is seated above every throne, and ruler, and power and dominion. When we pray we take matters out of our hands, and we put them in the hands of the one who turns all of history towards his good and wise purposes. That's more than just doing something. That's just about everything we *can* do.

And so the prayer of the troubled Christian is the prayer that Jesus taught is:

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

In the midst of trial we pray that Jesus will guide us away from the hellish wisdom of anger and violence and into the wisdom that comes from above. The wisdom that "is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." (James 3:17)

And we pray that God would deliver us! It's OK to ask that the trouble would end, that the trial would finish. And in the meantime we persevere in the patient, peace-loving path of Jesus. If you are in trouble...pray.

In Happiness

James continues: *Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.* (V.13)

One of my favourite prayers is from the old Anglican Compline service. The Compline is a service of prayers for the very end of the night. You've got evening prayer...and then compline right before bed.

We'll pray this together at the end of the sermon, but listen to it now.

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. **Amen.***

I think the most striking line there is right at the end: *shield the joyous.*

Those three words reflect a profound insight: there are particular temptations which arise from times of happiness.

In times of trouble we can be tempted to think that God is unable to help us and that we need to take matters into our own hands.

In times of comfort however we can be tempted to think that we don't need God to help us, as if everything we have comes from *our own hands*.

This is the attitude of the people in James 4 who make their business plans with no concern for the will of God.

It's the attitude that causes the rich to hoard their wealth and ignore the needs of the poor.

When you can choose between toast and cereal every morning, when you can buy your lunch at work or school, when you sit down to a full meal every night at dinner it can be hard to remember that we do really need to ask God for our daily bread.

James wants to shield us from this temptation to forget God, and all the arrogance and self-centredness which that forgetfulness breeds. And the shield which he arms us with is *songs of praise*.

How does that work? Well, as we sing songs of praise we remind ourselves that all that we have is not built up from the ground by our own hands but is given to us from above. Every moment of every day, every breath we take, every dollar in our bank out, all of it, is pure gift. Everything is given to us from the hand of God our Father in heaven.

And our hearts are filled with praise, we won't hoard what we have, rather we'll use it to bring honour to God. We won't spend it on our own comfort and excess, but we will put it into service of the needy around us. The very act of praise takes us out of the centre, that we would live instead for the sake of God and our neighbour.

But there is another way in which songs of praise can shield us in our joy. If you think back to earlier in chapter 5, James has told us that wealth rots, that clothes get eaten by moths, that silver and gold corrodes. And so if we centre our happiness in our own possessions, we'll find our satisfaction rotted, our happiness eaten away, and our joy corroded just like our *stuff*.

And so James wants us to find our joy in God himself. For our deepest happiness to be the fact we know God the Giver, not just in the gifts he gives. The theologian Henri Nouwen described joy as "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away."

Which is why all through this letter James has been pointing us to the unchanging goodness of God our Father in heaven. As he said in chapter 1: *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."*

In the act of praise we pray that God himself would shield us, that lesser delights would dissolve and we would slowly find where enduring joy lies. And we pray that far under the surface of our lives, however easy or arduous, there would be a deep source of joy, a constant current of love that will never run dry. *Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.*

In Sickness

James continues: *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.*

Now, I'm sure you noticed that the instructions here are much more detailed. Than those in verse 13 We're not just given the command to pray, but also a step by step guide about *how* to pray. Here's a top-Bible-reading-tip: when you notice a difference like that, it will likely be very fruitful to ask *why?* Why does James take the time to lay out these instructions for the specific trouble of sickness?

Well, I think the great temptation that sickness ushers in is the temptation to *despair*. Whether our sickness is chronic illness, or something more short and severe. Whether it is physical health or mental health. When we are confronted with the mortality of our bodies and the frailty of our minds, it is so easy to conclude that God has left us. That we have been abandoned. That we are all alone.

And the Bible is very honest about the fact that us humans are often slow and dim. Just being told the truth is rarely enough. And so in salvation God gives us the gift of baptism as this tangible picture of God raising us to new life and adopting us into his family. In the Lord's supper we get a *physical* word that Christ is our nourishing and sustaining spiritual food. And I think something similar is happening here.

For the elders of the church represent Christ to the people. And so as the sick person prays with the elders they can imagine they are like the sick who come to Jesus in the gospels. The touch of the elders is a felt as the touch of Christ. The words of the elders in prayer are heard as the healing words of Jesus. And the same is true of the oil. Everywhere in Scripture the pouring out of oil symbolises the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The oil running down your head is a reminder of the Spirit which fills your heart.

And I think there is absolutely no reason why we shouldn't revive this sort of practice in our church today. For who of us is not prone to despair? Don't we all need this sort of tangible reminder that God never abandons us. That Christ is with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. That in trouble, and in happiness, and especially in sickness that Jesus never leaves us and he never lets us go.

The teaching of James 5 is not rooted in outdated superstition, but in deep conviction. The conviction that we are frail and need to not only know the truth and feel it. The conviction that healing is possible because prayer is powerful and that the Lord is present.

But notice that James goes beyond the possibility of healing. He also says that *God will raise them up*. James wants us to ask for more than for God to simply show up like a physician and make the sick well. This kind of prayer has the audacity to ask that the God of the universe would stoop not only to heal us but care for us; to not just make our life easier, but to make us more glorious. As one writer says, "We need God to bring wholeness to *our souls*, even through the brokenness of our bodies."

In Sin

Which is why, I think, James makes the connection he does between sickness and sin in the second half of verse 15. Listen again:

*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.*

Now, the Bible is clear that there is no necessary connection between specific sins and times of sickness. The classic example of this is the question the disciples ask Jesus when they meet a blind man. They want to know whether he sinned or his parents sin. But Jesus says his sickness is not the result of any specific sin at all.

And yet, there is definitely a general connection sickness and sin. We live in a world of sickness because we live in a world of sin. And whenever we are forced to face up to the frailty of our bodies, we are also facing up to the fallenness of our souls.

And though there is not necessarily a connection between sin and specific sicknesses. There are examples in the Bible where sin does lead directly to sickness. Think for example of the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness who are struck by plagues. And it's not just an OT thing, for Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about how some in the church had died because of their favouritism and selfishness at the Lord's table.

The most striking example of this is David's testimony in Psalm 32:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord."

And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

It is not the case all the time, or even most of the time, but at least sometimes God will use sickness to humble those who are stubbornly resisting him. But whatever the case, sickness invites us to reflect on the reality of our sin against God and to humbly confess before him.

And just as we are not abandoned by God in our sickness. We are not abandoned by God in our sin. Just as God draws near to heal us in sickness, he draws near to forgive us in sin. And just as the presence of God is displayed in the reality of Christian community, so is the favour of God.

James encourages us to confess sins to one another, not so that we would really feel bad for what we've done. Rather, it's as we confess sin to each other that we *feel* the reality of grace.

In the face of our our own sin, it can be hard to know real assurance of forgiveness. And so in his kindness God gives us the gift of brothers and sisters who can speak the gospel to us in our weakness. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."

Or 1 John 1:7 says,

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Fellowship with one another, and the cleansing blood of Jesus go hand in hand. Which is why sin in the church is not a private matter. It's why we should bring our own sins into the light, and it's why we should lovingly pursue those who are wandering from the truth. A church of confession becomes a place of life and peace and safety as the love of God in the gospel covers over a multitude of sins.

Interestingly, this week we received the results back from the NCLS survey we did earlier this year. I just noticed yesterday that only 6% of us said they would *certainly* follow up someone they knew who was drifting away from church. Maybe we particularly need to hear James' concluding exhortation:

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

And if you hear that and you're not sure where you would even start in seeking to bring someone back... I reckon we could guess the answer that James would suggest. In trouble, in happiness, in sickness and in the face of sin — whether it's yours or others — then pray, pray, pray, PRAY.

Elijah: A Fitting Final Illustration

And to drive this message home James finishes with a final illustration about Elijah. From verse 17:

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.

My hunch is that this feels like a pretty random place to go for us. Of all the people of the Old Testament why does James choose *Elijah*? And again it will be fruitful for us to follow that observation and see where it leads us.

And as we go back to the story of Elijah we remember that he lived in a time of trial and trouble as unrighteous kings persecuted the few remaining faithful. And Elijah was tempted towards anger and despair. Until he heard God's Word in the desert. That God was still present. That God had preserved a remnant of faithful prophets. That God's promises were not forgotten. James, too, remember has called us to hear God's powerful word in the face of our own trials and troubles.

And Elijah too cared for a widow and her son in Zarephath. A jar of flour did not run out, a jug of oil never ran dry all through the time of drought. And when the woman's son was sick, Elijah's prayers brought him back to full health. And James, too, remember calls us to care for widows and orphans in their distress. Not to mention the connection between sickness and oil here in this chapter.

And most pointedly, it was Elijah who prayed first for drought and then for rain. And ultimately God answered Elijah's prayers and the rain came. And remember, James has been calling us to wait on the harvest of righteousness that God will bring as we persevere in the path of Christ-like peace. Like farmers we patiently wait on the early and the late rains. And here today we see that patient waiting looks like persistent praying. We pray, and we pray, and we trust that God will, in the end, send the rain.

And James's key point is that Elijah is just a human like us. He was not some super-doooper special believer, set apart in some category all on his own. Elijah was an ordinary man who had taken hold of the extraordinary power of prayer.

It would be easy I think to get side-tracked in this passage by questions about whether God still does miracles today, or whether the gift of healing still exists in this era of the church. But that would be to miss the point. We believe in miraculous deliverances, and supernatural joy and praise, and powerful healing, and the forgiveness of sins, and unlikely conversions, because we believe in the power of prayer.

We believe that in prayer we have access to the living God who the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. (c.f. Rom 4:17). The stunning fact James wants us to grasp is that our feeble prayers, which often seem so futile — our prayers genuinely transform the future, and will bear good and true and lasting gospel fruit.

And the more we believe THAT, the more we will pray.

THE PRIMARY WORK OF FAITH IS TO PRAY.

THE MOST PROFOUND WORDS OF FAITH ARE THE WORDS OF PRAYER

And so, if anyone of us are in trouble. Let's pray.

If anyone is happy, let's sing songs of praise.

If anyone is sick, let's pray together.

In the face of our sin, let's confess our sins together in prayer.

In every situation, with patience and perseverance, let's pray and pray and pray and pray.

And God our Father in heaven, *will send the rain.*

Let's pray this prayer on the screen together:

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this day. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. **Amen.***