

## Confession & Care | James 5:13-20 | May 7, 2023

Good morning. My name is Jacob Stubbs. I serve as a pastoral associate here at King's Hill. I am excited for the opportunity to dig into God's Word with you this morning. If you would like to go ahead and turn to it, we'll be in James 5. If you don't have a Bible, there should be one nearby, and if you don't have a Bible at home, please take that one with you today.

Last week, we wrapped up the book of Ecclesiastes. As a church, we have a conviction to preach through the whole counsel of God's Word, and going book by book is by and large the best way to ensure we are reading through the Bible as each book was intended to be read, and this also means we don't get to avoid hard topics in Scripture. As topics come up in the Bible, we address them head on.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

That being said, we will be taking a break from any particular book for the month of May for what we are referring to as the "Life Together" series. We will be taking some time to see some of the biblical callings that we have as Christians in the way we live with each other in the family of God and with those around us in general. At the heartbeat of this is what Jesus called the two greatest commandments.

We see in Matthew 22:34-39:

<sup>34</sup> But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. <sup>35</sup> And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Taking time to consider what our lives with each other as a whole will provide a good foundation before we start digging into some specific commands for the local church in the book of Titus which we will start in June. So, as we look at Life Together in the coming weeks, we will also be seeing, "Forgiving & Forbearing," "Serving & Sharing," and "Hosting & Honoring." Today, we will be focusing in on "Confession & Care." If you haven't turned there already, we'll be starting off in James 5, specifically looking at verses 13-20.

Before we read the passage, I think it's important to understand the context of the book of James. James is one of the many letters we have in the New Testament that were written during the start of the early Church following Jesus' death and resurrection. It was written by James, the half brother of Jesus. James specifies in his opening that this letter was written, "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." This is likely in reference to the persecution that Jewish believers were experiencing under Herod that we see in Acts 12. So, instead of writing to a specific church or group, James writes to a multitude of believers facing persecution in the midst of learning what it means to be a follower of Jesus, the Messiah.

James is most known for writing about works of faith; some go so far as to say that James is advocating for a works-based righteousness. In reality, James communicates that our faith in Jesus produces actions – actions that display Christlike love. Anyone changed by Christ will act and live a certain way, and today, we are going to see how that includes confession and care. The section of James we'll be looking at is actually the final paragraphs of the entire letter. This is where James ends his letter of calling believers to live out their faith.

James 5, starting in verse 13:

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. <sup>19</sup> My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> 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.

This passage in James does raise a few questions, especially looking at verses 14 and 15, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him...” Okay, so the elders have some sort of special power in their prayer? Are others in the church not meant to pray? Continuing in verse 14, “...let [the elders] pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord...” So, we should be breaking out some oil to anoint everyone here who is dealing with some seasonal allergies? Then in verse 15 “...the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up...” Okay, so are we talking about a health-and-wealth-gospel approach in which if you just have enough faith, then God will heal you? Verse 15 continues, “...And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven...” Alright, so have enough faith for the healing to work, the person being physically healed will automatically have his sins forgiven?

I do want to take a look at these questions, but I hope in answering them, we see the bigger picture of this text – as Christians, we are marked (1) outwardly by our care of others and (2) inwardly by our confession of sin. Looking outward – that care is seen by sharing in rejoicing and suffering, in prayer with and for others, and in physically caring for those around us. Looking inward – we should confess our sin to God as well as to each other as it leads to greater prayer.

Right at the start of this passage, James gives us some ideas on what it looks like to care for someone. Verse 13:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Immediately, we see how Christians are meant to care for others. We are to pray with the suffering, and we are to praise alongside the cheerful. This is an expectation James lays out for us – is someone suffering? Pray. Is someone cheerful? Praise.

A few weeks ago, we heard from Pastor Fady, who, in his sermon quoted a Swedish saying that has stuck with me that is very fitting for this passage, “Shared joy is double joy; shared sorrow is half sorrow.” As many of you already know, my wife, Katie, and I recently got approved for one of the city’s subsidized apartments. Everyone here knows housing in Boston is insane, so this apartment is a huge blessing. This came after months of paperwork, ups and downs, tons of emails and phone calls. Throughout this process, we had so many people praying for us. When we got the news about getting approved, I sent a message out to our Life Group to let them know that our prayers had been answered. This happened to be a Thursday evening when Agape was meeting at Northeastern. I later found out after I sent this message that Jonny was going around and telling people, “The Stubbs got the apartment! The Stubbs got the apartment!” Finding (what the city considers) affordable housing is certainly something to rejoice in, but to be able to share that joy with our brothers and sisters who had been by our side praying with us has made it so much sweeter, and we can glorify God even more because of that.

Looking again at verse 13, notice that James says “...Let him pray...” and “...Let him sing praise...” I find this interesting as I personally, want to jump to, “let’s collectively be sharing in this suffering or in this praise.” Instead, James places the emphasis on the person who is suffering or rejoicing. As prideful human beings, I think we can be quick to want to be the one to provide care or share in rejoicing. Instead, we should consider how the individual is rejoicing or suffering.

How many of you enjoy surprise birthday parties? How many of you hate the idea of being thrown a surprise birthday party? Not everyone rejoices the same way. For those who hate the idea of being thrown a surprise birthday party, their celebrating is likely made worse by surprising them on their birthday. Or, on the flip side, there are people who desire to have as many people as possible around them caring for them as they suffer or experience grief. There are others who need time alone. As we care for individuals, we need to remember the individual we are caring for. This does not mean that we allow someone to wallow in the midst of their suffering, but it does mean we should be seeking to care for everyone in the best way possible.

So, we see how we can extend care by rejoicing and suffering with others. James gets a little more specific with caring for the sick.

Starting in verse 14:

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up...

Here is where we run into some of those questions I mentioned earlier. It is important to note that people during the first century often talked about sickness differently than we do today. We may refer to having the common cold or dealing with seasonal allergies as sickness, but here, sickness is more severe. This is highlighted by the distinct circumstances of calling for the elders and the anointing with oil. So why these two elements? We see in Acts, that the elders are established to be those that are committed to the Word and to prayer for the church. This makes sense then that you have elders being called on to pray. And just as all believers are expected to be in the Word and in prayer, this should be no different here. Just because the elders are specifically called to pray here does not mean the rest of the church should not pray.

Then, we have the oil. Overarchingly, this passage emphasizes prayer. Every verse from 13 to 18 mentions prayer, and that emphasis is on the power of prayer.

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him **pray**. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he **prayed** again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

James seems to go out of his way to emphasize prayer in this passage, and he even goes so far as to specifically mention that it is prayer that will heal – not the oil. Anointing with oil within Israel's history was a symbol to show specific reverence or attention. The kings of Israel were anointed before taking the throne, priests were anointed as part of their ordination, and we even see the woman in Matthew 14 anoint Jesus to show how she valued Him. With that in mind, this anointing in James 5 appears to be a way to express the unique care being shown to the sick. The oil is not healing in any way, but it showcases the specific care through prayer that is being expressed.

But what about this “prayer of faith” saving the one who is sick? If you're like me, you hear that and think of televangelists misleading people by saying that if you just have enough faith, then Jesus will heal you. If that was the case, then good luck, because Paul prayed for healing of what he referred to as a “thorn in the flesh,” but God did not heal him.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Instead of trying to pray "with enough faith", we go to God in faith that He can heal and that He will carry out His will. Notice the rest of the sentence in verse 15, "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up..." We aren't the ones who are doing the healing. The elders aren't the ones who do the healing. The Lord does.

Verse 15 continues, "...And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." This echoes back to Jesus' earthly ministry. Almost every single time Jesus heals someone, He says, "Your sins are forgiven." Take Jesus healing the paralytic man in Matthew 9:1-8 for example,

<sup>1</sup> And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. <sup>2</sup> And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." <sup>3</sup> And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." <sup>4</sup> But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? <sup>5</sup> For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? <sup>6</sup> But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he then said to the paralytic--"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." <sup>7</sup> And he rose and went home. <sup>8</sup> When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

What a beautiful display. Notice that it says, "...when Jesus saw their faith..." James is not saying in 5:15 that when someone is healed of a sickness, they are automatically forgiven of sins. Instead, James is pointing back to this faith that trusts wholeheartedly that the God being approached in prayer for healing is the same God who forgives sins. I think James may also be writing this to address the same confusion the disciples had in John 9:1-3,

<sup>1</sup> As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

The sad reality is that we live in a fallen world, and sicknesses and diseases are part of that. When loved ones, brothers and sisters in Christ, our neighbors, ... When those around are faced with scary, life-threatening diagnoses, are in the midst of uncertain health complications, fighting some incurable disease, pray. Pray fervently. Pray in such a way that shows special care. Pray for their healing, but more importantly, if they don't know Christ, pray for their faith.

Starting in verse 16, James makes a slight transition to confession,

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." Or as some translations put it, "The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness." That is something I don't think we are used to hearing. To further solidify this, James gives us an example with Elijah – someone who his audience would definitely recognize as

a very godly man. But, notice James says, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” This is to say that Elijah was a human being just like the rest of us.

Why does James tie the idea of confession into this idea of effective prayer? First and foremost, 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” When we humbly come to Christ in recognition of our sin and our need for a Savior, we are cleansed from all unrighteousness. Clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Himself, we can come to the Father in prayer.

Why does the prayer of a righteous person have great effectiveness? Consider what John writes in 1 John 5:13-15:

<sup>13</sup> I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. <sup>14</sup> And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

“...if we ask anything according to His will...” How does someone pray according to God’s will? Well, you need to know His will to pray according to it. How does someone know God’s will? They seek it as revealed to us in His Word. This sounds like a righteous person to me. This is someone, like Elijah, who comes before God in prayer, praying according to God’s will because they have studied Scripture well and have applied it to their lives.

So, we are to confess our sins to God, but James specifically mentions to confess your sins to one another. Why might this be helpful? 1) Practically speaking, confessing sin brings another opportunity to care for one another as we can encourage each other towards holiness. If you know someone else is struggling with a particular sin, you can pray for them and check in on them and vice versa. 2) Confession brings about humility, and the more humility we have, the more we realize our need for God and His Word. 3) It can help mend relationships. While confessing sin to one another in general is encouraged, confessing sin to someone you have sinned against is an important step in seeking restoration.

That means we should take confession seriously. When we confess sin, we are owning up to it and admitting it was wrong. This isn’t like when your parents made you apologize to a sibling. “Jacob, tell Jason you’re sorry you hit him.” “I’m sorry I hit you.” “Jason, say, ‘I forgive you.’” “I forgive you.”

No, we are to be honest in our confession. Clearly alluding to Proverbs 26:11, Origen, a third-century theologian described confession as, “...The vomit of the soul whereby the conscience is eased of that burden which did lie upon it. Now, when we have vomited up sin by confession we must not return to this vomit.”

If confession then, can be so powerful and we are expected to do it, why don’t we see it more often? Perhaps our pride gets in the way. We want to be thought highly of, so we don’t want confession of sin to tarnish our reputation. Maybe it’s the fear or rejection or the fear of judgment. Unfortunately, this is sometimes based on past experiences. There are far too many stories of church hurt in which someone confessed sin, and rather than the church reacting with grace and forgiveness, someone ends up shunned by sinners for being a sinner. This is one of many reasons why it is important to belong to a community of believers that recognizes their own sin and sees it in contrast to the holiness of the God we serve.

Ultimately, we should be confessing our sin to God and to each other. Remember that Christ died on the cross in your place. He took the punishment for every sin that has ever been committed and will be committed. He was tortured and was treated as the lowest of all criminals. He took on our sin; can we not own up to our responsibility in that in a moment of confession? We are to confess our sins – the sins that nailed Jesus to the cross. It is in His blood that we are made righteous, and the prayers of the righteous have great effectiveness.

We should count it a blessing to be able to confess our sins to God and to one another. For these Jewish believers, this is a completely new idea. Rather than taking our confessions to a priest as the people of Israel did for thousands of years, as believers empowered by the Holy Spirit we are a royal priesthood as 1 Peter 2:9 tells us:

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

James closes out this section and his entire letter with these verses (starting in verse 19),

<sup>19</sup> My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> 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.

Here, James is not talking about Christians who stop coming to church temporarily or leave to go to another church. Notice he says, "...save his soul from death..." If this person was truly in Christ, then they would already be saved. To pray for someone who has wandered from the truth is one of the most caring things we can do. In this, we recognize our own sin, our own acts of rebellion against God, and our need for a Savior. This means we are to be forgiving, caring, and loving of those who have wandered from the truth, ready to welcome them into a loving relationship with Christ.

Ultimately, James's thesis remains – faith without works is dead. True faith in Christ brings about a unique care for others through confession and prayer. As we consider what it means to care for one another and confess sin to one another, I will leave you with some applications to think through before closing out.

Fair warning – I am going to throw a ton of applications at you. It is really four applications with several specific details and opportunities. I wanted to be as specific as possible because I truly believe the Holy Spirit can and will work through convicting all of us about at least one, if not many, of these things.

1. Rejoice with the rejoicing. Pray with the suffering.
  - a. This is able to be applied personally. When a friend, coworker, brother or sister in Christ share joyous news, rejoice with them. If they share a hardship, pray with them and be there for them.
  - b. As a church, we have multiple opportunities to share in rejoicing and suffering together.
    - i. Our Life Groups are kicking back off for the summer next week. All of our groups gather on a weekly basis and part of that time is spent in conversation and prayer with one another.
    - ii. We have been holding a Prayer Room every first Monday of the month at the Equip Center at 7:00AM. This has been a great opportunity to spend some extended time in prayer before the day gets going. It is so awesome to hear multiple voices lifting up various prayer requests about personal needs, the harvest, and the universal Church.
    - iii. Every Sunday, at 9:30AM here in this room, we gather together to share prayer requests and praises and pray for each other. This isn't just for those who are serving on that particular Sunday – this is open to everyone.
2. As James emphasizes, faith without works is dead. Just as we can prayerfully care for those around us, we can also care in very tangible ways.
  - a. Just as you can pray with people personally, I hope you are also looking for ways to jump in and care for individuals around you. Help people move, make someone dinner, babysit, help someone with the homework, etc.
  - b. Every September 1, we spread out throughout Mission Hill to help people move in and out all day long for an event we call the Big Move.

- c. Send Relief has a homeless ministry that some people in our church are involved in. If you are interested in helping out with that, you can talk to Aimee Stucke or Matthew Christopher.
  - d. We are connected with a low-income development in Mission Hill called the Alice Taylor. We will be doing a lot there over the summer in addition to the mentorship program we run with them.
3. Confess your sin to God
- a. This should be routine in our prayer lives. When we come before God in prayer, we should be confessing our sins to Him.
  - b. We can also be looking for sin in our lives as we read the Word. We should be asking questions while we read like: What sin is mentioned in this passage? And am I guilty of it?
4. Confess your sin to others
- a. This is especially true for when you have wronged someone
  - b. But this is also a way to encourage each other towards holiness
  - c. This means we should be fostering an environment in which people are open to confession. I am reminded of something Kevin mentioned in a sermon weeks ago. He said, “As believers, we are the most forgiven people on this planet; so, we should be the most forgiving.”

In summary:

1. Rejoice with the rejoicing; pray with the suffering.
2. Care for others in tangible ways.
3. Confess your sin to God.
4. Confess your sin to others.