

## Lesson 25

# Confess Our Sins to Others

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect. Elijah was a human being as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit, James 5.13-18.

## Introduction

James is one of the earliest epistles. In the decade before, Jewish Christians had been subjected to great persecution and dispersed around Palestine to avoid mistreatment and death by Jewish authorities. The Christians were under great stress and experiencing difficulty. Some were in outright physical persecution.

Notice how James urges his readers to:

- Move with patience during trials, 1.1-4.
- Stay faithful by remaining steadfast and look ahead to the *crown of life*, 1.12.
- Keep focused on the spiritual, trusting in the guiding hand of God, 1.17-18.
- Avoid being angry with the world, becoming bitter and vengeful, 1.20-21.
- Act on their faith, 2.14-26.
- Put away selfishness and jealousy, 3.13-18.
- Reject worldliness, 4.1-5.6.

Now, beginning in 5.7, as he begins to bring the letter to a close, James revisits the theme he opened the epistle with: endurance, patience, and steadfastness:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near. Brothers and sisters, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door! Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful, James 5.7-11.

The key directive in this section is found in verse 8: *be patient*. Here the ESV uses the word *establish* and the NASB uses the word *strengthen*. James wants his readers to stand and remain faithful during great persecution. In the original language this word conveys the idea of propping up your heart with determination, persistence, and inner strength. It means we keep hanging on, without complaint.

## How Do We Endure?

Verses 13-18 emphasize prayer as the key to endurance. *Pray* or *prayer* is used in every verse between verses 14-18:

- *Let him **pray**, 5.14.*
- *And the **prayer** of the faith will save the one who is sick...5.15.*
- *Confess your sins and **pray** for one another that you may be healed...5.16.*
- *Elijah... **prayed** fervently that it might not rain...5.17.*
- *Then he **prayed** again, and heaven gave rain...5.18.*

### Who are the suffering and sick persons of verse 13-14?

*Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises.* Does the sickness refer to a physical condition, or does it seem to apply much more to the **spiritual soul that is suffering**? I think the answer is easy to see. James is thinking about people who are struggling spiritually, to the point of exhaustion, and need to learn to **depend on divine resources**. Why can we be so confident of this referring mainly to those who are struggling with a spiritual problem verses physical sickness and disease?

When James mentions a *sick* person in 5.14, the wording means *to be sick and, as a result, in a state of weakness and incapacity*.<sup>81</sup> In the New Testament, this word is used mostly to represent being weak in the faith.<sup>82</sup> I believe this passage is about healing spiritual weakness, weariness, exhaustion, and depression which calls for a spiritual solution: prayer. To assert that this is referring to physical healing doesn't seem to fit the context well and is hard to reconcile with the last two verses of the chapter. Therefore, a section on how to help people who are spiritually weak and broken seems to make more sense.

### James 5.13: Prayer and Comfort

*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray,* James 5.13a. Look at 5.10, where the exact same word is used. The word involves suffering evil treatment or persecution. If there are those in the church enduring those things, the idea is to turn to God in prayer. This is addressing the person who is experiencing deep spiritual pain. It is someone who is suffering mentally and emotionally from the effects of their trials, temptations, and persecutions.

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<sup>81</sup> Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996.

<sup>82</sup> *The first main meaning is "weak," or "weakness," or "to be weak," originally in the physical sense. In the NT the words are hardly ever used of purely physical weakness, but frequently in the comprehensive sense of the whole man. There is also a "weakness which must be overcome." This is a weakness of religious and moral condition. More precisely these are the weak in faith, as in Romans 4.19; 5.6; 14.1-2, 21; 1 Corinthians 8.9, 11-12. See Stählin, Gustav. "Ἀσθενής, Ἀσθένεια, Ἀσθενέω, Ἀσθένημα." Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-.*

*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise,* James 5.13b. This is in the text to compare or contrast to the first sentence. James is referring to a person's spirit: a suffering soul and/or wounded broken spirit vs. a happy soul and/or a rejoicing spirit. One sings, the other pleads. Both are for comfort. Praise is a fundamental component in spiritual comfort. Prayer is basic to spiritual comfort.

## James 5.14-15: Prayer and Restoration

*Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord,* James 5.14. This is the person who has hit bottom. They've been defeated. Picture them lying on the spiritual battlefield. It's hard to pray. It's hard to make progress on your own. So, what is James' instruction? Call the elders of the church to come alongside you. They're spiritually strong. They have the spiritual strength you need. They're godly and you should draw on their strength. Think about how this fits in with Paul's teaching in Galatians 6.1.

How should the elders respond to a spiritually defeated person? They are to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. This is no ceremonial oiling. In the New Testament, the Greek word used here always refers to "secular usage where you literally oil something." In the ancient Middle East, oil and wine were often used as topical applications to cleanse wounds and soothe the skin.

According to Luke 7.46, *if you went to a home and you were the main guest, the first thing they might do after they cleaned your feet was pour oil on your head, a fragrant lovely oil just to soothe you from the dirt and the dust and the heat of the day. In that part of the world, the sun could dry you out and it was a refreshing time.*<sup>83</sup>

Oiling someone could have a literal and a metaphorical sense. If a Christian were literally being beaten and persecuted, the elders could take out some oil and rub the skin of the believer. But metaphorically, it could be referring to the stimulation and encouragement of a person's spirit, whose heart needs to be warmed and strength provided to their weakness. Think of a soldier who has been in the field. They're dry and parched from battle, nearing exhaustion. Wounds are all over them. They're weak and weary and tired of fighting the spiritual battle. Now, they have been able to come to their commanders - their shepherds - who come alongside and pray with them, sharing their spiritual strength. See their compassion and strength being used to bind up the broken heart.

This is the job of our shepherds. This is the ministry of restoration. See Psalm 23.

Notice 5.15a. The idea is that those who are exhausted and weary receive spiritual restoration and strength. *The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.* The idea is that the faithful prayer of the shepherds can deliver or rescue a person. This is all so a person can be lifted up by the Lord. Raise him up carries the idea of "rebuilding, to arise, to awaken, or to excite."<sup>84</sup>

Now, 5.15b. Not only will God raise up this spiritually defeated person, but He will also forgive their sin. The promise is full restoration. Any sins that pulled him to weakness will be forgiven. Any sins that he

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<sup>83</sup> MacArthur, John. *The Power of Righteous Praying, James 5.13-18.* Grace to You. No Pages. 6/6/2017 <http://www.gty.org>, 1987.

<sup>84</sup> The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament. Logos Bible Software, 2011.

fell prey to after succumbing to weakness will be forgiven. During this time, some Christians would have become weak from persecution. They would have compounded that weakness through sin.

## James 5.16a: Prayer and Fellowship

*Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.* Now, James turns his attention to the congregation. The admonition is not to wait until you get to the bottom but maintain a relationship with other believers - so that you are always praying for one another.

One of the general elements of fellowship is **mutual honesty**. And that means we must confess our sins to one another. That is, *we do not hide our weaknesses*. Sin wants you alone. It wants you isolated. As long as sin is private or secret, you can nurse it, nurture it, and feed it. God wants it open and exposed among the people who love you. To confess means to let it out; be honest; share your struggles; and let people know you're in a battle. Why? *So, you won't become weak, defeated, weary, exhausted, wounded, or victimized by Satan.*

Who is the *one another* in 5.16a? Simply put, it is *other believers in your circle*.<sup>85</sup> Other believers don't have to know every specific detail of every sin, but they should know about the weaknesses of your life until God gives you the victory over those areas. The idea is to share your life so that you may be healed or experience spiritual restoration. *Tell someone where your battle is and then pray for the battles they are fighting.*

## James 5.16b-18: Prayer and Power

*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working,* James 5.16b. The *power* in this verse is defined as energy. So, the energetic, empowered prayer of a righteous person will have a tremendous impact.

Elijah is used as an illustration. First, James says Elijah was just like us. He was human and subject to fleshly passions. He had times of great spiritual strength, followed by times of incredible spiritual weakness. But he *prayed fervently*. That means he really prayed. As a result, God literally controlled the rain because of his prayer.

Think of how this fits if we keep using the spiritual metaphor found in these verses. Just as God sent refreshing rain down on a dry, parched land in response to Elijah's powerful prayer, so God can provide blessing, joy, and refreshment to a parched, dry, weary, and exhausted soul that is in desperate need.

## Conclusion

Seeing James 5.13-18 from a spiritual sickness point of view makes much more sense than what may be considered as the traditional view. It solves the problem of deciding if elders should literally apply oil to a physically sick person as they pray over them. It helps us understand the role of prayer in spiritual

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<sup>85</sup> Sophocles, E. A. Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (From B. C. 146 to A. D. 1100). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900.

endurance. And, it helps us understand the ministry of restoration that falls to the shepherds who oversee a local congregation.

May we all humble ourselves and see the value and purpose of confessing sin to other people. We need help and encouragement during times of great spiritual need after Satan has had his way with us. We need to see the extreme value of our relationships with each other. Not every person in the congregation needs to know everything about our life, our struggles, and weaknesses, but *someone* needs to know. Find those you feel comfortable sharing with and lean on them, along with God, for spiritual strength and advice. You'll be glad you did.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. What is the most typical interpretation of James 5.13-18? Does it refer to physical sickness or spiritual sickness?
2. How does understanding the overall context of the epistle of James help you better understand this section?
3. Who is the person in view in 5.13? What type of suffering is he most likely facing?
4. Who is in focus in 5.14-15? What are they to do in helping the one who has come to them?
5. What is a primary role and function of the eldership? How does 5.14-15 reinforce this concept?
6. What does the word *save* mean in 5.15a?
7. How sure is the forgiveness in 5.15b?

8. What is involved in confession in 5.16a? How well do you follow through on instructions in this passage?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What makes a righteous person's prayer so powerful?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What can we learn about Elijah and prayer in 5.16b-18?