

MBC – 11/7/2021 – Pastor Doug Thompson
 JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH
“The Prayer of a Righteous Person”
 James 5:13-18

- James 5:13–18 ¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴Is 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. ¹⁵And 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. ¹⁶Therefore, 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. ¹⁷Elijah 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. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Intro – *How could we live without prayer?*

Think about the last time the power went out at your house – maybe it was last summer. Unless you had a generator that came on and immediately powered up everything in your house, you ran into some frustrations: you went to turn on the light in your closet – nothing. You went to turn on the AC, your TV – nothing. No wi-fi. Your microwave wouldn’t work and maybe, if you’re like me, you went to turn on your stove, smelled gas and remembered that the electronic igniter wasn’t working.

Very frustrating! But imagine for just a moment, what your life would be like if the connection with heaven was down, and you couldn’t pray to God—

- You get up in the morning and look out at the sunrise and it’s gorgeous, like this morning. The colors are brilliant – and you feel the sunshine in your soul. But you can’t praise God for it. You can’t thank Him. There is no one to hear it.
- You start to head out the door, but alas, you can’t find your car keys. And you are already running late for work. But you can’t pray and ask God to help you find your keys, like you have 1,000 times before. You will get no help from God. You are on your own.
- And imagine getting a frantic call from your best friend: they were just told they have stage 4 cancer. They are sobbing, asking you why this would happen. You want so badly to comfort them, to say something that will help – but you can’t tell them that you will pray for them. Imagine that!

Several times this week a brother or sister shared some emergency, some painful trial, or even a small frustration – and I can’t imagine how I would have felt, or how *they* would have felt, if I couldn’t have said, “I will pray for you.”

- Imagine that you just found out that *you* have stage 4 inoperable cancer, but *you* can’t cry out to God – imagine not being able to call on Your heavenly Father! That would be a living nightmare.

You might think that your prayer life is pretty weak and undisciplined, but the truth is, if you are a child of God, you probably pray the same way you breathe – *constantly*, for big things and little things, when

good things happen and when bad things happen. And especially, you pray for others – all throughout the day. We take it for granted that our heavenly Father will hear our prayers, don't we?

- We've all heard unbelievers struggle and fumble when bad things happen and they desperately want to give some comfort, but they literally don't have a connection with heaven. All they can say is something lame like, "Well, uh, I'm sending good thoughts. . .uh, I'm sending positive energy your way!" And they know that is meaningless. I read an atheist who said, "Prayer for the atheist can be like singing in the car or in the shower. No one is listening, and that is just fine."

No, it's not fine. And they know it. But they won't admit that there is a huge God-shaped hole in the middle of their lives. And their lives are empty and vain without Him. But for us, beloved, as God's children, we sing, "What a privilege to carry, *everything* to God in prayer!" Amen? James mentions prayer 7 times in 6 verses in our passage for this morning. He is going to tell us how to pray in every situation and to get answers to our prayers.

Review and context.

And this ties into what James has just been talking about: he just told us to speak the truth, let our yes mean yes, and no mean no. You don't need to fortify your word by swearing and vowing. Here, James is saying, "This is right way to bring God into your everyday life – not by swearing and making oaths, but by prayer! Don't swear *by* God, but pray *to* God." And the point in this passage is that we don't save prayer for extreme situations, but it should be as natural as breathing and as regular as eating.

- I remember as a baby Christian hearing about "spiritual breathing:" We inhale by taking in God's Word, and we exhale through prayer – confessing our sins, and asking God for our needs. And don't we breathe all day long?

Literally everything throughout the day is an opportunity to pray and bring God into our lives. Paul said—

- Ephesians 6:18 ¹⁸praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,
- 1 Thessalonians 5:17–18 ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

James begins with something we all experience—

I. When you are suffering.

- James 5:13 ¹³Is anyone among you suffering? *Let him pray.*

Isn't that this letter started? "Count it all joy my brothers when you encounter various kinds of trials." These scattered, Jewish-Christians experienced persecution and mistreatment wherever they lived, not for being Christians (yet), but for being Jews. Isn't it amazing that anti-Semitism has been around as long as the Jews have been around? Not a week goes by that we don't hear about a synagogue being vandalized, or Jews being slandered and blamed for all that's wrong in the world.

So many of them were suffering. James says, “Pray! Cry out to your heavenly Father who chose you before time began to forgive your sins, to make you a true child of Abraham and a true child of God!” Don’t get even, don’t get impatient. Don’t grumble against one another. Go to your Father in prayer.” Where else would you go? Paul calls Him our—

- Father of mercies and God of all comfort ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)
- Peter said . . . casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
 We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.
 Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
 Precious Savior, still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.
 Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
 In His arms He'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.

Whatever the pain, whatever the struggle, whatever the problem, pain, or shame – go to God, don’t wait and see if it goes away. Don’t try to get through it on your own. Don’t think that it’s too small and insignificant to bother God.

- Listen: Because God is sovereign over all, and has promised to work all together for good for you if you are a believer, you can know without a doubt – without a doubt – that your heavenly Father put that pain, that struggle, that problem, that shame, into your life to draw you to Him in prayer. Whatever other purposes He has for you and me in our suffering, His first purpose is that you would come to Him, seek Him, and find Him:

--to pour out your heart to Him; to seek relief from your suffering – of course that’s okay to ask for! To ask Him for wisdom if it’s His will that you “remain under” the trial – didn’t He promise to give it when we come with humble, pure hearts? To seek His comfort and His presence when you feel lonely and misunderstood: *“Jesus knows our every weakness.”* And just to have fellowship with Him and sense His strength; to know that He is for you. Beloved when you do that, you *will not* be disappointed: *“In His arms He'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.”*

- I talked to Norm Cote’ this week – our brother who was in the hospital for 11 days with COVID pneumonia, then was rushed to ER again this week with a heart problem. And we both agreed: Even if it takes suffering, heartbreak, or a trip to the ER to get you there – there is no better place in this world to be ,than on your knees, in prayer, communing with your heavenly Father who loves you unconditionally.

II. When you are happy.

- Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

This is where we forget to pray. When things are going great, when we don’t have any dark clouds hanging over our heads – we can forget our God, can’t we? Even when God answers our prayers with a yes – we can be so happy about the gift that we forget to give thanks to the Giver.

- Remember when Jesus healed 10 men of leprosy – something they never dreamed could happen – only one of them, a Samaritan, came back to give thanks to Jesus.

Are you cheerful, are you happy? Praise God for it, with your lips, out loud. It's one of the best things you can do for your spiritual health. Let me give you some spiritual counsel—

- Christians often wonder what to do with their emotions: "I don't know what to do when I feel so angry I'm about to explode, or I'm sad and depressed, or I can't shake my bitterness." Some stuff their emotions, and try to ignore them. Others think the healthy thing to do is to release their emotions – never hold them in. Maybe you've heard of "primal scream therapy," where people literally scream to release the hold of some childhood trauma. At one point in his life, John Lennon did this every day for six months.

*I've tried screaming at Elliot our cat: makes me feel better. Doesn't faze the cat.

The biblical way to handle your emotions is neither stuffing or dumping – it's to acknowledge them and submit them to God – *take them to the Lord in prayer*. Isn't that exactly what David did in the Psalms? He brought his whole gamut of emotions to the Lord, expressed them to the Lord, and so many times by the end of the Psalm, he has worked through whatever was troubling him. Just one example—

- Psalm 13 ¹How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ²How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, ⁴lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. ⁵But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. ⁶I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

I try to read at least one Psalm a day, and as I read, I'm praying back to God: "Father, I'm feeling just what David felt here – hear my cry, know my heart, *sanctify my emotions*. Bring my heart in synch with Your heart. I want Jesus to be Lord over my heart and my mind!"

- If you are sad and suffering, pray to God, if you are happy, sing praises to God – it's some of the best counsel you will ever hear.

III. When you are sick.

- James 5:14–15 ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? (Now we expect him to say, "Let him pray," instead he says:) 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. ¹⁵And 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.

Of course if you are sick, you can pray, your friends can pray, so what is this about calling for the elders and anointing with oil? Let's answer some questions, and the first question is—

A. What is the sickness here?

"Is anyone among you sick?" James uses the word *asthene_s* which can refer to any kind of illness or sickness, but in the NT it's often translated as "weak" or "weakness"—

- Acts 20:35 Paul said that “we must help the *weak*,” Rom.14:1, “as for the one who is *weak* in faith.”
- Romans 5:6 ⁶For while we were still *weak* (spiritually, not physically), at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
- 2 Corinthians 12:10 ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am *weak*, then I am strong.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:14 ¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the *weak*, be patient with them all.

But other times, this word means physical illness – about half the time it’s physical sickness, and half the time it is spiritual or emotional weakness. But remember that James has just been encouraging brothers and sisters who were suffering, being mistreated, and they were spiritually, mentally, and physically exhausted. Some of them were sick in body, some were sick in soul – and some were sick in both!

- We are psychosomatic beings: body and soul, interconnected. And we know that physical sickness can cause spiritual and emotional sickness – and depression and anxiety can cause very real physical sickness.
- Many people don’t know that Charles Spurgeon suffered from horrible bouts of depression – to the point that he couldn’t preach. He said this in one sermon: “The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits, The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in 10,000 ways, and die over and over again each hour.”

A couple verses later, James says that sin could have something to do with this sickness or weakness, so I believe that James is referring to any severe physical or mental, spiritual, emotional pain that a Christian is going through. I say severe, because apparently they are so sick they can’t go to the elders, the elders need to go to them, and if the elders “pray *over* them,” it could be because they can’t get out of bed. But—

B. Why are the elders called?

- “*Let him call for the elders of the church.*”

Why not? Any godly shepherd wants to know when one of his flock is suffering so that he can pray and minister to that dear person. That is a big chunk of my week – praying for folks, both inside and outside of MBC, who are struggling, and suffering.

And if these men are biblically qualified for their office according to the standards given in 1Tim.3, then they are godly men, and what does James say in v.16? “*The prayer of a righteous man has great power!*” We will see why in a minute.

- I covet the prayers of godly people – I seek them out and ask for their prayers. One of my dear pastor friends called me this week and prayed for me over the phone. I was so encouraged, and I believe his prayers have great power (Maybe you noticed the new truck I'm driving. . .)

*One more thing I want you to notice here is that person who is weak or ill is the one who initiates this call to the elders – the reason is that he or she knows that whatever their illness, it could have a spiritual element and they want the loving, wisdom, counsel, and prayers of these men. Beloved, if you call us, we will come and we will pray.

And there is something else these men do when they come—

- *“let them pray over him (the one with a severe physical, emotional, or spiritual illness), anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”*

C. What is the anointing with oil?

This passage is where the RCC gets its sacrament of extreme unction – preparing the faithful for death – but the prayer here is for healing. So what does it mean? Anointing with oil in the Bible had two different meanings: prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil as a symbol of being consecrated – set apart for their office. “Christ,” Messiah, comes from the word *chrīo* which means the anointed one, because Jesus Christ is our ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King, anointed by the Holy Spirit.

So the anointing James is talking about here could be symbolic of consecrating the sick person by prayer for healing. But James doesn't use the word *chrīo* here, he uses a different word, *aleipo*, which was used often of rubbing oil on a person for medicinal or cosmetic purposes—

- Mark 6:13 When Jesus sent out the 12: . . . *“they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.”* And you remember what that good Samaritan did for the poor man who was beaten by robbers and left for dead—
- Luke 10:34 ³⁴He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

If Bob is ever sick, that's what he wants done – but pour the wine in his mouth!

So the two main interpretations of this anointing are: symbolic or medicinal. Some say the elders would come with prayer and oil which they would rub on the person for healing – the contemporary application would be: pray, and encourage the sick person to take meds and see a doctor. Well that's wise advice, but I don't think that's what James means here—

- Even people in biblical times knew that oil didn't heal every illness, and it wouldn't touch depression and emotional weakness. And if the problem could be solved with medicine, why call the elders? Beloved, pastors and elders are generally not doctors, and they need to defer to the professionals in these areas.

I believe anointing with oil was a physical action, a visual aid, to symbolize that the sick person was being consecrated to God, by prayer, for healing. Didn't Jesus use visual aids, like putting his fingers in a person's ears, or rubbing mud or saliva on a person's eyes? And didn't He institute the Lord's Table to help us understand His atonement for our sins?

- *Our elders here at MBC have gone to suffering folks many times over the years and anointed them with oil and prayed for them. It's a very moving thing. And it does just what James is saying over and over in this passage – it brings God into this person's illness and suffering and struggling. It's not for every little snuffle, but if you are physically, or spiritually, or emotionally at the end of your rope, please call the elders and we will come and do just what James says here.

*You might be wondering what kind of oil we use: essential oils, of course. . . unless the illness is arthritis. Then we use WD-40.

D. What is the healing that is promised here?

- James 5:15 ¹⁵And the prayer of faith (here, it's the prayer and faith of the elders, not the ill person) will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up (I think he means, "up," out of bed). And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Whatever James had in mind about anointing with oil, that is subordinate to praying in the name of the Lord, amen? It's the prayer, not the anointing that will save. But what does that mean?

- The word for *save* here is used of salvation from sin, and also being rescued from sickness – and James could mean both here: a person who is suffering greatly in body or soul can be saved from their sins, or set free from their suffering by the "prayer of faith" of the elders. And if they are, it is "the Lord Jesus" who does the saving or the healing.

But we know that God doesn't always answer His children's prayers with a 'yes.' God didn't take away Paul's thorn in the flesh. Paul said that he had to leave his co-worker "Trophimus, sick in Miletus." He didn't take away the cup that His own Son had to drink, even though He prayed fervently – and when our time is up, all the prayers in the world aren't going to keep us here one more day, right?

- But we don't know when that time is for anyone, so we pray, in faith – not that God will give us what we ask for – but that the Holy Spirit will intercede for us with groanings too deep for words – according to the sovereign will of God – Romans 8:26-27. And those are the prayers that God answers!

I don't say this lightly, but the last several folks we anointed and prayed for, went home to the Lord – one less than 24 hours after we prayed, in faith for her healing. So did we lack faith, or pray for the wrong thing? No! Our Father loves to hear the prayers of His children, even when He chooses to give a different answer than what we ask for. And how much comfort has come to those people, and their families when we have gathered to anoint and pray? We will only know when we get to heaven.

- But what does James mean: "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."?

He means that if their body or soul sickness is due to sin, which it could be, this should also be a time of confession and repentance. And God always hears those prayers. And again, when we have gone to pray and anoint a suffering person, the elders have often asked if there were any sins they needed to confess to God because that could get to the root of the problem. David said—

- Psalm 32:3–5 ³For when I kept silent (about my sins), my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

The consequences of his sin made David physically ill. It almost killed him. Maybe medicine would have alleviated some of the symptoms, but the cure was a matter of confessing his sins to God. That’s when healing came.

*Am I saying that anytime we are sick we should ask God if we have some sins that we need to deal with? Well why not? God has your attention, so why not cry out to Him: “Oh, search me O God and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts, and see if there be any hurtful way in me!” Why not do that?

And Paul goes on to say that we should do that with one another too—

E. What is the confession here?

- James 5:16 ¹⁶Therefore – if God can heal in response to our prayers – and if some of our afflictions are due to sin – then confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

He means here, you don’t have to wait until this is serious enough to call in your elders – if you have sinned against another brother or sister, go and confess to them. If you are struggling with temptation or sin, or physical or emotional illness, enlist a godly friend to pray with you and for you – ! Let others know so they can pray. Please! Not just for the sake of getting answers, but so that others will join in the thanksgiving and praise to God when He answers!

- He isn’t saying that all sickness is due to sin – we know that – but some of it is, and we know that too. We will never have all the scientific, medicinal cures for our diseases, this side of heaven, amen? We do what we can. But we do have the cure for the sickness of sin, and it comes through confession, repentance, and forgiveness through Christ. I have to wonder how much more physical health we would have in the body of Christ if we were dealing with our sin issues in this way? We were just talking about this at our men’s study in Proverbs—
- Proverbs 3:7–8 ⁷Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. ⁸It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

So we pray with each other, for each other, for our spiritual needs, and our physical needs—

*And I know you do this because so many of you share your requests with me – and as you know, I share mine with you, constantly. And with email and texting, Christians do this 100 times more than they used to be able to, and we should thank God for the technology, amen? When I came to MBC going on 32 years ago, we had a rolodex and a stapled sheet with phone numbers for our “phone prayer chain!” Best we could do back then, but we can do so much more now.

- *But step way back for just a minute, from this passage, to this letter, to the entire NT – and we saw this over and over in Acts – it’s just assumed that believers get together, and share their

lives and their burdens with each other? And it wasn't just once a week, it was their lifestyle. They lived as community. As a family of brothers and sisters.

IV. The powerful prayers of a righteous person.

Well James finished with an amazing statement about prayer, and an illustration—

- *“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”*

Who is he talking about here? Yes, the elders of the church, but then he moves to all of us as we pray and confess to one another – if we are righteous people, our prayers can have great power – do you see that? And that is exactly his point when he mentions Elijah: *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*¹⁷ *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.*

A. The example of Elijah.

He was a sinner just like you and me. He had his weak moments. He was no spiritual super-hero. But look at what his prayers accomplished—

- and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

You can read this story in 1 Kings 17 – we won't do that now – but Elijah was told by God to go and tell wicked King Ahab that He was going to punish him with a severe drought. Elijah prayed, the rain stopped for 3 ½ years – please don't pray that prayer – he prayed again, and the rain came. Amazing, supernatural, but no less amazing and supernatural than what God can and does do through the prayers of ordinary Christians like you and me; Do you believe that?

So let me end with this:

B. Why is it that the prayers of a righteous person accomplish more?

And James means, the godly Christian who is walking faithfully and obedient with God. He or she can expect more answers to their prayers. Why?

1.) Sin is not a continual barrier to their prayers. Listen—

Prayer is two persons (one human, one divine), in a relationship, communicating. When your relationship with God is hindered by unconfessed sin, your prayers will be hindered until you take care of the problem—

- Isaiah 59:1–2 (NLT) ¹Listen! The LORD's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is his ear too deaf to hear you call. ²It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.
- Psalm 66:18 (NLT) ¹⁸If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

- 1 Peter 3:7 (NLT) Peter says to husbands “Give honor to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God’s gift of new life. Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered.

Confess your sins, restore your relationship with your Father, and the power will come back to your prayers.

2.) Righteous people pray more!

What is the very first reason James says we don’t receive answers to our prayers?

- James 4:2 You do not have, because you do not ask.

But godly people do just what James is saying here: they pray all the time for all sorts of situations. More prayers = more answers. Simple math.

3.) They pray in line with God’s revealed will.

What is the second reason that James gives for unanswered prayer?—

- ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

God is only going to answer prayers that align with His will, right? Godly Christians are filled with His Word, filled with His Spirit, and they pray in line with Jesus’ name. Result? More “Yes” answers.

4.) The keep praying.

They keep asking, seeking, and knocking. Because they know their Father, they don’t stop. So they get answers that others don’t get. Let me close with this—

In Mark 9, a man brought his poor demon-possessed son to Jesus’ Disciples. He begged them to do something, they tried, no go. Now earlier, Jesus gave His 12 men the authority to cast out demons. So they had the authority to do this. It wasn’t a question of God’s will. Listen—

- vv. 28–29 ²⁸And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁹And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

They stopped praying! Of course they started with prayer – but God decided to stretch their faith and withhold the answer so that they would keep praying. They stopped before the answer came!

We will only know, when we get to heaven, how much more God wanted to give to us, His children, if we had kept praying. Or – you can keep praying, and find out right now!