

James 5:13-18 The Prayer of Faith

Our passage today continues the overall theme of suffering in the Letter of James. As he approaches the end of his letter, he commands his readers to do the most practical thing they can do: Pray. And here we find ourselves more than two thousand years later, and nothing has changed for us. We all suffer. We all have trials. And, we also, are commanded to pray. And pray more we must! From one perspective prayer is the means of God to accomplish his purposes in this world. What a privilege! What a blessing! This means we need the Word of God from James today to help us see truth, to encourage us to continue, to convict us, all of this in our process of sanctification. Now, I must add that this passage is also a difficult one. There are differences of opinion on how this passage is both understood and applied. And I must admit that I am not completely sure on every specific point of meaning. But that's ok. I think the general truths on the prayer of faith are clear. I have 4.

1. The Prayer of Faith Is for All Occasions. We see this throughout the passage. In v. 13 we read: **“Is anyone suffering? Let him pray.” “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.”** The word for “sing praise” is literally “to Psalm.” And our prayers are filled with all kinds of heart expressions such as praise, thanksgiving, honor, trust, and all kinds of different types of petitions. We pray when times are bad; we pray when times are good. In v. 14, the occasion for the prayer of faith is when a brother or sister is sick. **“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church . . .”** With Elijah, he prayed for it to stop raining and he prayed for it to rain (vv. 17-18).

This means that we must also pray always as Paul says, **“Pray without ceasing”** (1 Thess. 5:17). Eph. 6:18 says, Pray **“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 . . .”** Col. 4:2: **“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”** A couple applications:

Application: Pray always because God cares for you! 1 Pet. 5:7 says, **“Cast your anxieties upon him for he cares for you.”** He loves to answer the prayers of his people. Why? Because prayer screams, *“I need you God.”* It proclaims, *“God you are the Lord. And YOU ALONE are both willing and able to answer when I call.”* In all honesty, we might be saying when we don't pray, *“Lord, I don't really care.”*

Application: Be steadfast in prayer. Oh, how I struggle in this area. From the beginning of coming to Grace, my priorities as an elder have been to: 1) preach, 2) pray, 3) make disciples, and 4) be patient. But, I must confess that (in my estimation) I have fallen so short in prayer. I do not want this. This passage is just as much for me as it is for you. Prayer is the means to all the blessings of God in this life. So what can you/I do? Some suggestions: before you get out of bed, say a short prayer to God. At some time during the day, get alone with God and pray, even if it is a short time. Take moments to pray short prayers. When someone says, *“pray for me about_____?”* pray right then. Husband, when your wife is having a hard day, stop at that moment and pray (vice versa). Young people when your friend is struggling with something, stop and pray. Before you go to sleep, say a short prayer. The opportunities are endless. And

when you pray in your prayer closet, ASK the LORD to give you grace that you might be compelled to pray more.

2. The Prayer of Faith Is Both Individual and Corporate. We have already touched on individual prayers, now we see corporate prayers. This text mentions prayer for the sick, particularly a sick person who is apparently unable to travel. Look at v. 14, **“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.”** Here we see the elders of the church (local body of believers) as representatives of the entire group, going to pray for a particular person. And in v. 16, the context is praying for “one another,” “confessing sin to “on another.” **“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another . . .”** Again, the context is trials and suffering. And when one member suffers, we all suffer. Therefore, pray for one another. So, as we think about some applications, I must ask, “What do we pray for?”

Application: We pray for specifics, healing, relief from financial suffering, travel mercies, etc. But, more than all these we pray for spiritual strength to endure trials with godliness (See 1:2; 12, 5:7-11). Why? God does not always heal. He does not always give relief from financial stress. He doesn’t always give travel mercies. But, He will always give strength and special grace to his people to endure, to endure with patience, to endure with joy. Why ? . . . Because our reward will come at the end in the “crown of life” (1:12). And now, God’s grace is displayed greatest in our weakness.

Application: At the same time, we must pray for those who are sick among us. In this context it appears to be a sick person who cannot travel. Therefore, this person calls for the elders to come. And on behalf of the body of Christ, they anoint with oil and pray. This is one of the difficulties of this passage. We don’t know what type of sickness. We don’t know the exact purpose of the oil. We don’t know if this sickness was a direct cause of some sin in that person’s life (which seems to be the case because of v. 15 which says, **“if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”** I think a person can certainly get sick because of his/her particular sin.) My guess is that it wasn’t a common cold, flu, virus, broken bone, etc.; it was one where the person was bedridden, possibly close to death, probably not of old age. Today, God does heal when he chooses, and when we neglect to pray for God to heal the sick, we neglect a great blessing, and a possible healing.

Application: When one is sick, we are all sick. When one sins, we all involved. Not to say that when one sins, I sin. But, when my brother or sister in this body sins, I am affected greatly, along with the rest of the body. I represent the body, and the body represents me. This means that confession of sin can and will bring great healing to a local body.

Application: Confession of sin goes hand in hand with prayer. Individually, we see the principle from the Lord’s prayer. *“Forgive my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me.”* Now, this doesn’t mean we confess every sin to the body. The overwhelming majority of confession takes place in your prayer closet. But there are times where you have sinned against a brother or sister and you need to confess and ask for forgiveness. Other times, in our home groups, God may lay it on your heart to confess something before the group. And you know, when this happens, confession is good for the soul. It is also good for the body. Rarely will any

of us find anyone on the other end of our confessions than a person with loving, open arms. Remember Eph. 4:32: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”** Those who cannot forgive, may not know what it is like to be forgiven. As Christians, we confess. And, we forgive. I would add that a group of confessing Christians is a sign of maturity. Let’s move on.

3. The Prayer of Faith is Righteous. Look at the 2nd part of v. 16: **“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”** Then vv. 17-18: **“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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”** I believe this passage teaches that the prayers of a righteous person are effective. Let that sink in a moment. I think there has been great confusion here. The tendency is to think, *“Oh, I’m not as righteous as my neighbor; I’m not as righteous as the elders, I’m certainly not as righteous as Elijah.”* Therefore, *“my prayers are not very effective.”* So, I need to be more “righteous” in order for God to answer my prayers and in order for my prayers to work. And usually, what we are thinking about is godliness. There are many places where the “godly” person is called a “righteous” person. This is why these verses are used by Roman Catholics who believe that the “priest” is more “righteous.” Therefore, we must go to a priest and confess our sins and they will be forgiven. And, this “priest” can pray for me, for healing, for help in a situation, even for the forgiveness of sins.

But, I believe this text is teaching the exact opposite. Why? Let me ask, *“Who is righteous among us? Me, you, the elders, the deacons?”* I myself in times past have thought, *“If I could just be a little bit more godly, my prayers might be more effective.”* What do you think about that? Is this what this text is teaching? Well, turn with me to John 14:13. Jesus says, **“Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”** (See also 15:16;16:23, 26). Brothers and sisters, God does not answer your prayers because of your goodness, for there is not one ounce of goodness in you by yourself. God answers your prayers because JESUS IS GOOD. Your prayer is not effective because in and of yourself YOU ARE RIGHTEOUS; it is effective because JESUS IS RIGHTEOUS. This seems to be James’ point with Elijah. He says, **“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours . . .”**

Let me ask, “Why would God desire to answer the prayer of Elijah more than he would desire to answer the prayer of you?” “Is there anything that would make Elijah more righteous than you?” It seems clear to me that our righteousness is found in Christ alone. And Elijah’s faith was still connected to Christ as he looked forward to the deliverer. And we stand on the other side of the finished work of Christ. “And if any man be in Christ he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). We must understand this. When you pray in Jesus’ name as a Christian, you are praying a “righteous prayer.” Why? Because of the person and work of Jesus Christ as the righteousness of God.

Rom. 3:21-25: **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law . . . the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith . . .”** This is the Gospel! Jesus was born of a virgin. He lived a sinless life. And after 33 years of perfect obedience in both his heart and

his deeds, He laid down his life as a substitute sacrifice. And his death was propitious. The righteous judgment of God was poured out upon him. And, his death did not only take away God's wrath. It also took away our sins. By his death we are JUSTIFIED, or "declared righteous" in God's eyes. 2 Cor. 5:21 teaches this truth: "**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" Christian brothers and sisters, we pray in Jesus' name. And this is a righteous prayer! For our prayers come from a sinner . . . who has been COMPLETELY forgiven and is now covered by the blood of Christ. Shame on us if we say our prayers are not righteous enough. Every prayer made by a Christian is a "righteous" prayer.

Heb. 10:18 says, "**Where there is forgiveness of these there is no longer any offering for sin.**" We try to make offerings of our "good" deeds. We try to be answered because of our "good" prayers. But, in and of ourselves, our righteous deeds, our righteous prayers are as filthy rags (Is. 64:6). But, in Christ, they are not so. They are as if Christ himself were praying them.. This teaching flows from the doctrine of justification, our standing in Christ. "There is therefore now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

But, as regards our sanctification, we are all at different levels in our prayer lives. Some pray little, some pray much. But, for the Christian, especially the Christian who is confronted with the truths from this passage and the rest of the NT, we must press on in prayer. We must improve in our understanding of prayer, our love of prayer, our endurance in prayer, our specific words in prayer as more and more according to the will of God, etc. The more we pray the more God answers. We will never exhaust the blessings of God that come to us through prayer. This is the prayer of faith! And it is all in Jesus' name! For He is our righteousness.

Application: This means God hears what we consider to be the most feeble of prayers. Child in Christ, Adult in Christ, . . . righteous prayers. One day Christian, 50 year Christian . . . righteous prayers.

4. The Prayer of Faith is Effective. In other words, "they work," they are "powerful." Look at v. 15: "**And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.**" And then of course v. 16 again: "**The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.**" I believe the word "save" and "raise up" both have to do with the physical healing of this person. In this context the RESULT of the prayer of faith is healing. The prayer of faith is effectual.

Let me say quickly that the emphasis is on the effect of the prayer, not on the effect of the oil. There are at least 9 views as to the purpose of the oil. Catholics use this verse to support the sacrament of "extreme unction," where a person close to death is anointed with oil and prayed over. Others point to the medicinal qualities of oil. I believe it was more symbolic than anything. But, the focus of this text is the "effect" or "power" of the prayer, not the oil. We only see the use of oil associated with healing one other time in the NT (Mark 6:13), and none of these with Jesus himself. Today, I believe we are free to follow this example or not. However, James' focus is that PRAYER causes things to happen, not the oil, not the "amount" of faith a person has, per se. (see above)

James example is Elijah. Can you imagine the sky closing from rain and then opening up for rain because of his prayers? Well, that's what happened! He prayed. God answered. In Nehemiah 4, the Jews were rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem when they learned they were going to be attacked by their enemies. What did they do? They prayed and posted a guard day and night to meet the threat. God protected them. (Neh. 4). In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah was dying and Isaiah told him so. Then, he prayed and the Lord replied to him, **"I have heard your prayer . . . I will add fifteen years to your life"** (Is. 38:5). The application is that our prayers matter. **"We have not because we ask not"** (James 4:2). Therefore, we must pray and we must ask. Let me end with some applications.

Application: God works our prayers according to his sovereign will. Elijah's prayers of stopping and beginning rain coincided with God's control over the weather. What a mystery! Some people think, "If God knows all and is in control of all, and will bring about his plan in this world, then why pray?" Have you ever heard this? It is a great mystery that our prayers matter . . . AND that God's plan is wise and infallible. These two facts are always true at the same time. If we believed that God was in charge and actions mean nothing, then we would be discouraged and very passive. If on the other hand we really believed that our actions changed God's sovereign plan, it would lead to fear and confusion. But, if both are true, we can't frustrate God's plans. And, at the same time, we know he will answer. This is a great truth. God ordains to hear prayers and he ordains the answer of these prayers according to his will.

Application: We must pray according to God's will. This means we cannot pray according to our sinful desires. Also, it means that sometimes what we think is good, really is not. I believe the more we move along the road of sanctification, the more effective we pray . . . not because a less sanctified person does not pray righteously, but because we learn to pray more and more according to the will of God. And this comes through growth in the knowledge of God's Word as we learn more and more to lean upon and ask for his promises He has already given.

There is so much more I could say today on this topic. But, our prayers are effective. Therefore, pray, pray more. Endure in prayer. The puritans liked to say, "pray until you pray." But, the prayer of faith works.

I realize there are unanswered questions in this text. And by God's grace, as he gives growth in understanding, I hope to understand these better. But, the deeper truths are clear, even if we don't know the specifics. The Prayer of faith is for all occasions. The Prayer of Faith is both individual and corporate. The Prayer of Faith is a righteous prayer. And, the prayer of faith is effective. May God have grace on the preaching and teach of his Word today as we enter this next week!