

September 9, 2007

James 5:13-18

Alright good morning. Hope you enjoyed your short week – grab your Bibles and let's look at one of the last passages in our study of the book of James. James 5:13-18.

Speaking of having a short week, maybe you are like me and on Monday you love the day off but then on Tuesday through Friday you almost regret it because all that you've got to do in a normal 5 day week now is crammed into 4 and you never really feel like you get on top of things.

It is easy for us in the midst of all our activity to let the urgent stuff of the day crowd out the more important. That's true in our spiritual lives as well. Too often we fail to do that which is most important and probably the best illustration of that is how often we as believers fail to pray.

JC Ryle once asked the question why is it that some believers are so much "brighter and holier" than others? And he answered it by saying that he believed that 19 times out of 20 it comes from different habits in prayer. He said "I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray little and those who are...pray much. Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin or sin will choke prayer."

And when you look at the verses this morning it's not hard to figure out that James is talking about the same thing. Let's look at it.

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

So in verse 13 he says we should pray for ourselves as individuals. In 14 that there are times we should have others come pray for us. In 15 he shows us that God hears and answers our prayers. In 16 he says pray for each other in your church. And in 17 and 18 he encourages us to pray through the example of Elijah. You think it is safe to say that **James is pleading with us to PRAY?** I think so.

And it's not just that James wants us to think that prayer is good or right. It's got to be more than that. Our vision as a church explains that – that the life in Christ we are pursuing and living is a life changed by belief into obedience. James doesn't want us to think that prayer is just what believers are supposed to do; he wants us to believe that prayer is crucial for our lives. That no matter what happens, our first response is prayer. Look at what he says first, "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray."

The word for **trouble** literally means **sick or anything that is HARD to handle or causes you PAIN or distress**. He's asking – is anyone here depressed, distressed, downhearted? Anyone here not know what to do? You need to turn to God in prayer.

Now that's not a newsflash is it? You expect me as a pastor to say that. None of you are going home today saying, man I can't believe it. I really learned something incredibly new at church today – when my life is hard, I should pray. Wow. Never heard that before.

But really when you think about it, this is pretty ironic. That James – and that God has to actually so many times in the Bible – command us to pray when we are suffering is ironic since we ought to be begging Him for the right to do so.

Charles Spurgeon talks about how no one has to remind us to eat or to go to work or to work hard or to sleep. We don't forget those things because they are necessary for our health. But we often forget to spend short and long periods in fellowship and prayer with our Father and our God. He says "we give our strength and freshness to the pursuit of money and our fatigue to the pursuit of God."

The reality that James is reminding us of is that even though many of us know we should pray when we're hurting, still we don't do it. Or if we do – we're not very serious about it. Kind of giving lip-service to God but we don't cast ourselves completely on Him, we don't cry out to Him, we don't depend on Him.

That's what James is pleading with us to do. If you are suffering, you need to pray. That's not a cliché or a nice thing pastors say. It's a command – **running to God in prayer shows you know you NEED his grace – his help – his guidance if you are going to get through your situations and even GROW in the midst of them.**

But he doesn't stop there. The next thing he says is even more difficult to obey. He says "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise."

First he shows us how to respond when we're struggling. Now he shows us how to respond when we're doing well. Don't just turn to God when you're sad – go to God when you're feeling good. When God enables us to experience joy – in any circumstance – our immediate response should be to cry out to Him in praise.

The point is as believers we should be living God-centered lives. Like a compass that you shake up and the needle bobs around a little while but it always comes back to pointing north. When stuff happens in our lives – good or bad – that looks random – we know it is not and even when we get bumped around our hearts find their center back on God and we pray and we sing praises to Him.

This command may be even harder to obey because it is easier to forget about God when things are going well. When life hurts, we're aware of our need for God, but when it's good – it's easy to forget how much we need Him.

This week is the anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers. And if you think back to that time, after it happened, everyone was talking about God. Either pouring out their hearts in prayer or blaming Him for allowing it to happen – but they were talking about God.

But the thing was, many of them had never done that before. On September 11th we were hearing that as a nation we need to cry out to God because of our suffering. But on the 10th we weren't hearing we need to sing praises to God because of all our blessings.

And that's why this command is needed – because we can be so short-sighted. When our hearts are comforted it is easy to forget that contentment ultimately comes from God. **When God gives us BLESSINGS, it is easy for us to get so wrapped up in the blessing that we take for granted the one who GAVE it to us** so James says, if anyone is happy he should sing praises to God.

So far then we've got – pray to God when you are suffering and sing to God when you are doing well – either way, your life is all about God. But again – he doesn't stop there. He goes on and says in 14-15

14 *Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.*

15 *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.*

If there's a top ten list of the most misquoted, misinterpreted, and misapplied passages in the Bible then this one is high on the list. But it deals with an important issue so we need to understand it. Because you are going to get sick. And you're going to want to know – is James talking about me? Because this promise is pretty incredible. The Lord's going to heal, restore raise up. Next time I get a cold, do I need to call the elders to come lay hands on me? Who needs a doctor with a promise like that? Sorry Nicole.

But before you get too excited, check out the context. We have a person who is sick – but it is not just any person who is sick. He isn't talking about you having the sniffles. He uses two words for sick here – in verse 14 it's a word that can mean just really weak but in 15 it's a word that usually means sick to the point of death. **The words for sick then indicate a SERIOUS physical problem.** So this guy has a serious problem – not the hiccups here.

And notice what he is to do. He is to call the elders to come pray. The word **call means to SUMMON to your side.** So he's too sick to go to them, they have to come to him. Notice – this isn't a healing service or anything. It's pretty private. And it isn't initiated by the elders but by the person who is sick.

So the elders come and their main purpose is to pray. That's the main verb in the verse. But there is also this issue of anointing with oil. And a lot of people make a big deal out of that but it isn't even the main point. But it is a point. Some think this is a medicinal thing – that oil was used then for medicinal help. But these are pastors – not doctors – and there was other medicine available.

Most likely this is what happened many times in the OT – the elders anoint the sick person as a **SYMBOL which is meant to encourage the person who is sick.** It is a picture or illustration. Much like I was reading in 1 Samuel in my quiet times this week when Samuel anointed David with oil as king as a symbol of God's pleasure and blessing. This represents God's blessing on this person's life – **a reminder that God CARES about you and wants what is best for you.**

So far so good. Kind of tricky – but we can understand all that right? But James goes on. He writes, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven."

Now that's the kind of verse that makes you shake your head and ask yourself – did I read that right?

Because look God makes a promise here. **"The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well."** That promise has tripped up a lot of people.

So let's step back and look at in the light of the rest of Scripture. **We know from the whole of Scripture that it is NOT ALWAYS God's will to heal.** As just one example – take the apostle Paul. If anyone could have prayed a prayer of faith and had God heal him it was Paul. And he did – he prayed three times that God would take away his thorn in the flesh but each time God said no and wouldn't take it away. So whatever James is saying we know he's not saying that God always promises the Christian great health.

So if we look at the context of James, there are a few things that stand out as tips to what is going on here.

First – the sick person calls the elders. Why the elders? Why not just some good Christian friends?

Then you notice that James is talking about being sick and in verse 15 he all of a sudden begins talking about your sins being forgiven. What's that about? Why would he go from the physical to the spiritual?

And then verse 16 begins with "therefore" – which always means "in light of what I just said, now this..." And his now this is "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

So you've got to be going, what's going on here? What does confessing your sins to one another and praying for one another have to do with being sick?

Well this is a tough passage and I think **the key to understanding is in the ILLUSTRATION that James gives in verses 17-18**. An illustration is meant to help you understand what is being said – so what is this illustration about? James says look,

17 *Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.*

18 *Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

This story is in 1 Kings 16. Elijah was prophet of God. And during his ministry, the people of God sinned big time. The Bible says that the king of Israel then – Ahab – did more to provoke God to anger than any of the other kings before him. God takes sin seriously and decides – as he had before in the Old Testament – that he was going to punish his people for their sin by withholding rain. Elijah is the man who proclaims that that's what God is going to do. James says he even prayed about it – God heard him – and for 3 and half years Israel goes through major drought. God punished the nation physically because of their unrepentant sin. The goal of which was to get his people to come back to him.

And that's what happens in this story. Israel sins. God punishes them. Elijah confronts the people – you remember the story where Elijah challenges the prophets of the idol Baal to a duel basically and tells the people to choose who they are going to serve and then calls down fire from heaven. The people repented. And so they no longer needed that physical punishment for their sin so Elijah prayed and God sent the rain.

So here's the deal. The people were punished physically because of their unrepentant sin and they were shown mercy when they repented of their sin. And the means God used to accomplish all that was a righteous man's prayers.

Here's how all that ties into James 5. **Not all sickness is the result of some personal SIN**. Just because you get a cold doesn't mean God is punishing you. **But the Bible does make it clear that at times God DISCIPLINES his people for their sin through physical sickness.** (1 Cor. 11)
That's what's happening here in James.

You've got this guy who is very sick. His sickness is a wake-up call God uses to bring to light some particular sin he has not repented of. So he calls the elders of the church. He needs their help in dealing with all this. They come. He confesses his sin to those who are responsible for Him before God. They pray over him and anoint him with oil.

And by the way – notice it says the elders pray a prayer of faith. That's not a special kind of prayer. It just means praying trusting God and his promises. You may have heard it said that if a sick person prays and has enough faith he'll be healed and they point to this passage and say if you aren't healed it's because you didn't have enough faith. But James isn't even talking about the sick person's faith is he? He's talking about the elders – the pastors – praying a prayer of faith so if you want to blame someone it's the pastors fault – but that's not what he's saying. James is just saying the pastors just need to pray a prayer trusting in God and his promises and if the sin is the cause of his sickness, God will forgive him and will raise him up.

That's the connection with the illustration of Elijah. **When the condition of physical chastisement for unrepentant sin is dealt with according to James 5, then the REPENTANT Christian will be healed because there is no longer a NEED for physical chastising.**

The point here is less about sickness and more about sin. Which is why he goes on in **verse 16** and says, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

In other words in light of what I just told you can happen because of unrepentant sin, take care of it before it gets that far. Deal with your sin on a regular basis. Make a habit of confessing your sin to each other. Not in little groups where you tell everyone you’re a sinner, but that if you are sinning against someone, what you need to do is confess it to them. That’s the biblical principle all through the Bible – **confess your sin to the one you OFFENDED. So instead of refusing to repent and God having to step in and bring you low, James says deal with it and PRAY for each other.**

Now having said all that I admit that this is a difficult passage. And one of the things we have to be careful of when looking at the controversial parts of this passage is not to miss the point which James makes very very clear. Not only in all this does he say it is important for us to pray, he tells us why. He says, “The prayer of a righteous man - most versions say the effective prayer or the earnest prayer of a righteous man - is powerful and effective.”

Prayer is not some technique to get you through the day. It’s not some preacher’s gimmick to make you feel better when you’re stressed. Prayer is powerful. Here James says prayer is strength waiting to be released.

In the midst of all our busyness **we must never forget what God says is of the UTMOST importance: we must be people of PRAYER.**

Are we? Or more importantly, are you?
What role does prayer play in your every day life?
Do you pray when you are hurting – really?
Do you praise God when things are going well?
Do you confess your sin?
Do you pray for your each other?
Do you pray for your church?
What role does prayer really play in your life?

And in terms of application – is there any unconfessed sin that you are harboring in your life? Is there anything you know is wrong that you are choosing not to deal with that is heading you straight for God’s intervention where He will have to bring you down in order for you to deal with it? Is there anything you need to confess to someone else who you have been hurting through your sin?

God tell us through James that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

So let’s pray.