

## Prayer: A Way of Loving Others

James 5:16-18

Today I want us to think about the importance of praying for each other. Listen to Richard Foster's comment on this topic in his book on prayer:

If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others.  
(*Prayer*, p. 191)

Foster's point is well taken. Prayer is not an obligation, something we *have* to do. Prayer is an expression of love: because we care about people who need more than we can give, we ask God to work.

This past week I found myself in several conversations in which it quickly became obvious that the person needs something that *only God* can give. I hope that my words were helpful, but they needed a lot more than words can accomplish: they needed God Himself to do a work in their circumstances and in their lives. But that didn't mean that I was helpless or that my involvement had ended. It meant that my involvement turned to praying for them. I'm sure you've been in the same situation this past week. You've sensed the need to pray for others you care about.

***“Pray for one another. . .” (James 5:16-18)*** Please turn with me to James 5:16-18. In this passage James describes how powerful and effective our prayers for each other can be. These verses follow James' description of how elders are supposed to pray for healing of the sick. James introduces the possibility that in some cases, sickness is related to sin. Sickness certainly isn't always (or even usually) related to sin, but since there's the possibility, James mentions that “if [the person who is sick] has committed sins, they will be forgiven him” (v. 15). In the following verse (beginning in verse 16) James broadens up his comments about prayer and sin. He challenges all of us to “confess our sins” and “pray for one another” as an ongoing habit.

16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Therefore – in light of the fact that God heals in response to prayer and in light of the fact that God forgives sin – James says, “Confess your sins to one another.” This may sound like a really strange thing to do because you may have spent your whole life hiding your sin and covering up your sin. But in the body of Christ there should be such love for one another that we don't have to live that way. We should have friends that love us so much that we can “confess our sins” to them without fear of being shamed or rejected. The term “confess” is sometimes translated “agree” or “admit”; when we confess our sins to another person, we admit what we've done and agree with God's view of our sin.

This is a very different approach than you may have experienced; it may be very different than what you've experienced in churches. Listen to Gordon MacDonald's insight into this issue:

Recently, I turned over a two-by-six board that had been lying on the ground behind our home for a long time. I was startled to discover an enormous city of bugs hiding underneath. It seemed as if there were thousands and thousands of them dwelling in that dark and damp place. And it was clear that they did not appreciate my exposure of their life on the underside of that board.

As I watched them scurry for cover, I thought of what might be called the underside of the church: those numberless people who walk into sanctuaries all over the world carrying their secrets behind bright clothing and forced smiles. They sing the songs, pray the prayers, listen to the sermons. And all the while the secrets fester within the private world causing either a constantly broken heart or a hardened heart. They come in fear of their secrets being exposed, and they quite likely go in fear that they will have to live this way for the rest of their lives. Believer me, the underside of the church is there, listening and watching to find out whether there is anyone with whom their secret might be safe if revealed.

*(Rebuilding Your Broken World, p. 67)*

Those words may describe you. You may be carrying secrets that you're afraid you'll have to carry the rest of your life. James 5:16 presupposes that every person in the body of Christ should be able to find others with whom their secrets are "safe." What a tragedy if the church is a place where we can't be honest and transparent with at least a few others. We need to be a community that is so characterized by love that we can confess our sins to one another.

Notice that in addition to confessing our sin to one another we are to "pray for one another so that you may be healed." The implication is that our prayers for one another are a strategic element in our healing. I would understand James to be talking about healing in a rather comprehensive sense here (not only physical healing – which is its usual meaning). The term healing is also used of being delivered from demonic influence (Acts 10:38); it is used of the restoration God brings when people turn back to God in faith and repentance (Acts 28:27, 1 Peter 2:24).

Both confessing our sins to one another and praying for one another reflect the interdependence that God has built into the body of Christ. You and I should certainly confess your sin directly to God (1 John 1:9), and we should certainly pray directly to God (Matthew 6:6). And yet there are times when God works *through* someone else in the body of Christ. The sooner we understand and embrace this the better. A spiritually mature believer isn't someone who is so strong that s/he doesn't need others; a spiritually mature believer is one who *knows* that s/he needs others and enters into the types of relationships that will make such help possible.

James' last comment is a very simple statement of fact: "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Paul used the term "righteous" to refer to a person's standing before God: in Christ we are justified, declared righteous. But James used the word "righteous" the way Jesus did: a righteous person was one who lives rightly, who seeks to please God from the heart. James says that the prayers of the person who is walking with God are "powerful and effective" (NIV). As we mentioned a couple weeks ago, God responds to us (our entire life) and not just our words in prayer. If you ever need another

motivation to walk with God, here it is. If you and I want to have powerful and effective prayers, we should be seeking God (see 1 Peter 3:7).

In verses 17 and 18 James points to Elijah as an example of how the effective prayer of a righteous person can accomplish much.

17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

1 Kings 17 and 18 describe the events behind Elijah's praying (implied in 17:1 and 18:42). The drought was God's punishment on the land of Israel's for King Ahab's apostasy. After Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he went to the top of Mount Carmel, knees to the earth and prayed for rain. "And the sky poured rain" (James' description).

The only other occurrence of this term ("with a nature like ours") is found in Acts 14:15. Paul and Barnabas were in the city of Lystra preaching Christ. A man who was lame from birth (he had never walked before) listened intently. When Paul saw that the man had faith to be made well, Paul commanded him, "Stand upright on your feet." The crowd was so amazed when the man leaped up and began to walk that they started worshipping Paul and Barnabas as gods. Being familiar with the Roman pantheon, the only thing they could figure was that Paul was Hermes (the god who spoke/explained things) and Barnabas was Zeus. This, of course, mortified Paul and Barnabas; the whole point was that they should worship the one true living God. Paul's explanation was (in part):

15 . . . "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men *of the same nature* as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them.

There is always the tendency to put the spiritual-minded and the spiritually-mature in a different category or class than everybody else. Paul's point in Acts 15 was that he and Barnabas were men "of the same nature" as the people of Lystra. There is only one class of humanity.

In James 5, James is pointing out that Elijah was a man "with a nature like ours"; he wasn't in a different class of humanity whose prayers were more effective than everybody else's. I was talking with Lowell this past week about this passage and his comment was that Elijah being just like us "is a hard sell." On the one hand, he's right: not many of us have called down fire from heaven while doing battle with the prophets of Baal. On the other hand, even if our circumstances aren't nearly as dramatic as Elijah's, we are appealing to the same God to whom Elijah appealed. The book of Hebrews develops the truth that in Christ we have full access to the throne of grace. We can come boldly into the holy of holies (i.e., the presence of God) because of the blood of Jesus; our sin no longer requires us to keep our distance for fear of judgment.

James is challenging us to take seriously the possibility that *our* prayers might "accomplish much." I presume that God could have set up His involvement in this world in a variety of

different ways. But what we've seen from Scripture is that one of the primary ways that God is pleased to work is in response to the prayers of His people. God could have chosen to work independent of His people, but instead He includes us in His plans and ways. One of the ways He includes us is through prayer. He wants us to love people so much that we pray for them, asking God to accomplish His will in their lives. That's why James challenges us to realize that our prayers can be powerful and effective.

With this challenge in mind, let's consider two very simple points of *Application*:

**Praying for others.** In light of what we've been discussing, I'd like for us to consider praying for others as a primary way of loving them. Remember Foster's comment that, "If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer." Think of someone you love – someone for whom you want the very best (e.g., a family member or a friend). I really believe that ***the more we love people the more we'll pray***. The more we love the more we'll pray. And we won't pray vague, timid prayers that don't really cost us anything in terms of time or spiritual effort. We'll invest time and energy in praying for God's very best for people.

Last week we talked about praying according to the will of God. We should allow our prayers to be shaped by the things we know are true from Scripture. Bonhoeffer gave this challenge in that regard:

The richness of the word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.

*(Psalms: the Prayer Book of the Bible, p. 15)*

He's pointing out that if we take our cues from Scripture, we can pray rich, powerful prayers for people. Consider the possibility, for example, of praying this for someone you love (it's Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:15-19):

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

That would be a powerful prayer to pray for the people you love. That type of prayer is an expression of love for others because you're petitioning God to do in their lives the type of thing that would give them unparalleled joy. You are asking God to do more for them than you ever could. That's love. My encouragement to you is to always have a couple of people for whom you are committed to loving through prayer.

One more thought before we move on . . . Loving others through prayer isn't limited to our family and friends. Jesus actually commanded His disciples, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." One of the primary ways that we love our enemies is by

praying for them (not praying *against* them – *for* them). Sometimes prayer is the thing that turns enemies into friends. As you pray for God to work in their lives and for God's blessing in their lives, you may find yourself thinking and feeling differently about them.

**Asking for prayer from others.** When we ask for prayer, we are asking others to love us. "Will you pray for me?" is a specific form of asking, "Will you love me enough to invest time and energy in going to the Father on my behalf?" It is good to ask people to pray for you, but you should be cognizant of what you're asking.

Paul often asked churches to pray for him. He wasn't trying to make them feel good by asking them to pray; he believed that God would act in response to their prayers. In 2 Thessalonians 3:1, for example, we read this:

1 Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; 2 and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.

It is possible that you are facing some sin or some circumstance that you cannot handle independent of other people. It's not that you need a human mediator between you and God; there is one mediator between God and man – the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). It is a matter of interdependence in the body of Christ. God has designed the body of Christ so that you need the gifts, insights, encouragement, love, and prayers of others. These things aren't icing on the cake (i.e., optional); God designed the body of Christ this way. Asking for prayer (perhaps in conjunction with confessing your sin) could be a very strategic thing for you to do.

That's really why we've begun to have prayer ministry after each service. We want to function as the body of Christ in praying for each other. If you would like prayer, simply come to the front after the benediction; you'll find someone who would love to pray for you.