

The Relevance of Prayer

James 5:13-18

Many of you have heard the story about the little girl whose Sunday school teacher asked, "What's brown, has a big bushy tail, climbs around in trees, and scurries along telephone wires?" The little girl thought about it for a minute and then said, "I think it's a squirrel, but I'm gonna say 'Jesus.'" In Sunday school the answer is always "Jesus."

Today's passage asks a series of questions, and the answer is always "prayer." Are you suffering? Pray. Are you cheerful? Pray. Are you sick? Call the elders to pray. Have you sinned? Confess your sins to one another and pray. Back in chapter 1 James said that if you lack wisdom, pray. In chapter 4 James said that we lack some important things because we ***don't*** pray.

Why is prayer the answer to all of James' questions? In other words, why is prayer relevant in every circumstance? Because ***God is relevant in every circumstance***. When we pray - whether petition, lament, praise, or thanksgiving - we are recognizing how relevant God is in various areas of our lives.

As we walk through James 5:13-18, I'll try to point out why praying in any and every circumstance is a way to acknowledge God and invite His grace into the details of our lives. We'll see that various aspects of God's character will be a motivation to pray in every circumstance we face.

Suffering and Happiness (James 5:13)

13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.

The word translated "trouble" here in the NIV is translated "suffering" in most translations. It refers to our "inner experience of having to endure misfortune" (Davids, *James*, p. 191). What types of suffering are you experiencing right now (whether self-inflicted or others-inflicted or merely common to humanity)? James tells us that perhaps the most strategic thing we can do is pray. Why? I'll mention three reasons: God is the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1); God uses the trials in our lives to refine us and conform us to the image of Christ (James 1, Romans 8), God is seated on the "throne of grace" and is very willing to give us mercy and grace to help in time of need. If we don't pray when we're suffering, we will likely misinterpret our suffering and will miss out on the mercy and grace that will meet the need of the moment. [Prayer ideas: pray for God to refine you; pray for enemies (if they're the source of your trouble); pray that you'd imitate Christ in your suffering.]

"Is anyone happy/cheerful? Let them sing songs of praise." Why is it appropriate for us to turn to God and praise Him when we're satisfied by something? Because "every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above"; we've experienced a good gift from our heavenly Father. Praise is appropriate because it's right that we take the time to express to God that ***our cheerfulness is grounded in His goodness***. You can

probably remember a time when somebody looked you in the eyes and said, “What you did for me. . . what you said to me was a powerful encouragement in my life. . .” That’s a satisfying thing to hear. It’s appropriate for God to experience that same satisfaction when He showers us with good gifts. [Prayer ideas: sing a hymn; sing a worship song; sing a children’s song; sing Doxology.]

Sickness (*James 5:14-15*) In these verses James discusses what to do when we are physically sick (although the person may be unwell emotionally and/or spiritually).

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

James isn’t suggesting that you shouldn’t seek medical help or that you shouldn’t pray for yourself or that you shouldn’t have family and friends pray for you when you’re sick. But there might be occasions when you will call “the elders of the church” to pray over you. The elders are the recognized shepherds in the church who care deeply about the health of the church on an individual and corporate level. It’s not that elders have some special “hotline to heaven”; it’s simply one more way that God has built interdependence into the body of Christ. Elders come and pray as representatives of the entire church body. In essence the elders are praying, “Heavenly Father, we ask on behalf of the church that you bring healing to this person, this specific member of the body of Christ.” It’s appropriate to call for the elders to come and pray because God has designed the body of Christ to be interdependent.

When called, the elders come and pray “pray over” the sick person and “anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.” In the Old Testament, anointing someone with oil (pouring oil over their head) symbolized that God was with that person and had set apart that person for His purposes. When you anoint a sick person with oil, you are acknowledging God’s presence and calling on his/her life. To put your mind at ease, if you call for the elders to come and pray for you, we won’t pour a cup of oil over your head; when I’m involved, my practice is to put a drop of oil on my finger and make a cross on the person’s forehead. We do this “in the name of the Lord,” expressing that Jesus, our Lord, is the One who heals.

15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

A “prayer offered in faith” is simply a prayer that’s prayed with deep confidence that God is a good Father who is willing and able to give good gifts to His children. In chapter 1 James contrasted asking for wisdom “in faith” vs. doubting God. The comments that “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well” and “the Lord will raise them up” (perhaps meaning “up out of their bedridden state”) sounds like a blanket statement that prayers of faith **always** result in healing. James **is** expressing confidence in God’s ability and willingness to heal; therefore we pray boldly in faith, simply asking God to heal. But we acknowledge God’s sovereignty; for reasons we don’t understand, there are times when God doesn’t heal a person (see 2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

In the last line James acknowledges the **possibility** that the sick person might also be dealing with some sin issue. We know from John 9 and other passages (e.g., Job's illness) that not all sickness is the result of sin; but sometimes that is the case (see 1 Corinthians 11:30). Whether or not sin has caused the illness, God desires to bring a fresh experience of forgiveness to the person who is sick. This observation leads James to talk specifically about praying for each other in relation to our sins:

Sin (James 5:16) In verse 16 James broadens out his focus to the entire church. What James advocates here can almost be considered preventative medicine.

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

In addition to confessing our sin directly to God, there is a place for confessing our sin to one another. Here James envisions two or more people confessing their sins to each other; it's not a one-way experience, but reciprocal. When you confess your sin to another person, instead of hiding your sin from the other person, you bring it out into the light. You readily admit that what you have done (whether slander or gossip or anger or lust or sloth) is NOT God's design, God's desire, or God's will. You're actually admitting, "This sin I committed this week is one of the reasons Jesus was willing to be falsely condemned, beaten, scourged, stripped naked, and crucified in public. I agree with God that my sin required that type of payment."

Coming clean with another person can be healing in and of itself. In Psalm 32:3-4 David wrote that when he remained silent about his sin his vitality drained away (he felt it in his body). The reason James mentions for confessing your sins to another person is **so that that person can pray for you** and so that God might heal you (primarily a reference to spiritual health, but possibly physical also). The fact that God is our Healer provides great motivation to pray for each other. The fact that God didn't withhold His only Son assures us that He is eager to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

I know that many of you already have relationships in which you confess your sins to one another and pray for each other. I can't imagine where I'd be if I didn't have such relationships. If you don't have that type of relationship with one or two others, I would strongly encourage you to pray that God would raise up someone you trust and someone who will pray for you. I have to believe that God loves to answer such prayers.

The last sentence in verse 16 reads, "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." A righteous person is someone who is rightly related to God and who therefore lives rightly. That person's prayer is "powerful and effective" because God answers prayers of His people when we pray in faith. In verses 17 and 18 James uses Elijah as an example of such a person.

Elijah is an example of a righteous person who prayed powerful and effective prayers. (James 5:17-18) Elijah was a prophet during the days of the divided kingdom; he lived in the northern kingdom of Israel. Clearly Elijah was exceptional and unique in

the history of salvation. At Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17), Elijah appeared alongside Moses. But James emphasizes his similarity to every believer, not his uniqueness.

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

James' point is that Elijah wasn't in a different category than us; he had a nature like ours (he was a human being with weaknesses, fears, and anxieties). 1 Kings 17 and 18 give the account James is referencing. God's judgment on King Ahab and Israel came in the form of a drought (see Deuteronomy 11:17).

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

Significantly, Elijah's prayer for rain three and a half years later wasn't something he prayed randomly. God had told Elijah that He was ready to send rain (see 1 Kings 18:1). Elijah went up on Mount Carmel, crouched down, put his face between his knees, and prayed. He prayed with confidence because he knew he was praying according to the will of God. His praying is a pattern for us to follow (see 1 John 5:14-15).

Elijah's circumstances were obviously unique. But his experience suggests that we should pray bold prayers when it comes to the will of God. Instead of limiting our praying to things that we think will likely happen anyway, we can pray for God to do things that are far beyond our control - especially in the context of confessing our sin to one another and praying for one another. "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"!

I had my annual physical a couple weeks ago. One thing my doctor checks is my reflexes. I sat on the table with my leg bent at the knee. He took this little hammer looking thing and tapped the tendon right below my knee. As expected, my leg involuntarily kicked forward. I had what they call a knee jerk reaction. It was a reflex.

Pay attention to your circumstances and to your emotions this week and try praying as a reflex. When you realize, "I'm in trouble" or "I am suffering," pray as a reflex because God wants to give you grace. When you realize, "I'm am deeply satisfied right now," praise God because He gave you a good gift. If you are ailing physically, you can pray, you can have your family and friends pray, and you can call the elders to pray because God is our healer and He's more generous than we can imagine. If you are feeling legitimate guilt over some sin, confess your sin not only to God but also to a trusted friend, asking them to pray - because God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Why is prayer relevant in every circumstance? Because God is relevant in every circumstance.