

Practicing Prayer – James 5:13-18, 8/18/19 Steve Harden

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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. And 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. Therefore, 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. 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.” James 5:13-18

Thank you. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever. So today, our focus is on prayer. Not simply the subject of prayer, but we will spend time praying together. Something a little bit different, a little bit new for us. I’m reminded though that in Acts 2 the early church gave themselves to four things: the apostle’s teaching, to fellowship, to breaking of bread, and the fourth one? Prayer. These are the things that they did together as a community, and God blessed them richly. Our focus this morning is on the last one of those: prayer.

Often, we think of prayer as just an individual sport, an individual event. But I think here from Acts 2 we see very clearly, and other places as well, that it’s a community thing. All of us coming together and praying and asking our heavenly Father for what we need. I believe prayer is to be practiced in community: fervent, real, life changing prayer happens together. I believe that God answers individual’s prayer, I can pray, and when He answers my prayer He receives

glory for that. But think, if I pray and don't tell anyone, and God answers my prayer then He receives glory for that from me. But what happens if all of us together pray for one thing? Isn't His glory even greater? Because all of us together then recognize that God, Himself moved on our behalf? So, we pray corporately; we pray together.

We often spend a lot of time talking about prayer and how to pray, but oftentimes together we don't spend a lot of time praying. I want to move that balance just a little bit today. So, this is what is going to happen today, Lord willing. Lizzie read to us from James 5 and we'll kind of walk through that fairly quickly, quickly for me, right? And then, we're going to spend some time praying. I'm going to call the elders forward and they will be here and if you need healing of some sort, if you're weary emotionally, or spiritually, or physically, or mentally, and you want the elders to pray for you, we're going to take time to do that. We're going to take time praying together just in your seats; we're going to take time. So that's where we're headed today, I wanted you to know and be thinking about that and praying, asking the Lord's blessing. But we're really asking for God to move powerfully in us and among us, okay? So, let's get to it. Our text is James 5, not an easy text. A lot that gives all of us a little bit of perplexity. But I wanted to frame our thoughts around four things today. Pray when, pray with, pray for, and pray and walk.

So, first, pray when. There in verse 13, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." So, we pray when we're suffering. And we sing when we're cheerful. I think in our vernacular, James is calling us to authenticity, to be genuine. There are seasons in life, sometimes there are seasons when we are full of cheer and everything seems to be going well, and we're just really happy. And then there are times when we suffer. When we

are suffering it's important for us to be honest enough with ourselves and with our community to be able to communicate, "I'm suffering." When we're cheerful, then we communicate with ourselves and we're grateful, and we communicate that with our community. As a community, together, all the time we have people suffering, and we have people cheerful. At the same time. So, what does that mean? That means that being friends in community together, if I'm suffering, I can still sing with my friend and be grateful that the Lord is blessing them so. And if I'm grateful and cheerful I can still pray with my friend who is suffering, and weep with them. That's kind of what a family does. Either we're cheerful, or we're suffering, but we're in it together. Authenticity and compassion make for a really great family. So, if you're suffering, pray, and sing with your friends. If you're cheerful, sing, and pray together with your friends. But whatever you do, don't pretend. Can we have one place at least in our lives, that we're honest? So, pray when you're suffering.

Pray with. Verse 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. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." I don't think anybody agrees on this verse, okay? Let's just get that out there to start with, that there is a lot of ambiguity right here, but I'm going to do my best, okay? So, first, you pray with the elders, you pray with your shepherds. Then you pray when you're sick, here the word sick is used both here in verse 14 and in verse 15. Now these two are different words, there in 14 and 15, in the original language. But both of them have been translated into English in two different ways. They are translated sick as in physically ill in this text but they're also in many other places in the Word translated 'weak,' 'without strength,' 'ready to collapse.' So what this suggests to me is not that

it's one or the other, but that it's a wide scope of things that we're to pray about. It instructs those who are physically ill to call upon the elders to pray for them. But it also calls for those who are just spiritually exhausted, weary with life, to call upon the elders to pray. You know, sometimes it feels like the load that you are called on to bear is unbearable. I know. So, you pray. And you share it with one another, and they pray for you and your community, your elders pray for you. Call for the elders, James says. Now, in the Scriptures there are several different terms for the leaders of your church. You find elders, you find overseers, you find pastors, you find bishops, all of those terms talk about what we commonly call elders. But you know, my favorite term for the office of elder? It's not any of those, but it's the term shepherd. I just love that thought, that word picture of a shepherd caring for his flock. That is the role of the leader of your congregation. There's richness in analogy in that. That's why when we are sick or weary, we can call upon them, because we know that they are the shepherds of our souls. Who better to call on to pray for you than the shepherds who have responsibility for you! It's a beautiful, beautiful picture. So, call for the elders.

And then we see that they will anoint you with oil. Oh boy. What's that about? I don't know. I think there's two different ways that we can think about that. First of all, all throughout Scripture we can see that anointing and oil is tied together with the Holy Spirit. Go back to 1 Samuel 10, do you remember when Samuel anointed Saul to be king? He anointed him with oil, and very shortly then the Holy Spirit came upon Saul greater than all other men, is what it says. So somehow the anointing with oil is tied spiritually together, or figuratively, with the Holy Spirit. But the second thing to think about that it could be, is oil was a form of medical treatment in Palestine, 2,000 years ago. In ancient times they used oils to cure and to sooth an illness. Do

you remember the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10? Do you remember what the good Samaritan did? He bound up the wounded man's wounds and poured oil and wine on the wounds, to soothe and to cleanse. So, James may be saying in this text, 'anoint with oil' may mean to seek appropriate medical attention as well as pray. I don't know. And I would say nobody else knows either. But you know what? It really doesn't matter, at the end of the day, James says the elders anoint with oil and pray for people. So, we anoint with oil, we don't really know why except that it's okay to just obey. It's always okay to obey.

Then we move on down through the text and we see, it says "pray the prayer of faith." So, what does pray the prayer of faith mean? Well first, what it doesn't mean. First of all, the prayer of faith doesn't mean that if I have enough faith, that God has to do what I want. It doesn't mean that. We addressed this a couple weeks ago, God does not oblige Himself to move forward with my agenda. Especially even if I work myself up into some kind of spiritual lather. God is not committed to my agenda. He doesn't have to do what I tell Him to do. Let me give you some examples, that it's not just about the strength and how positively I think about something. Do you remember in Mark 9, Jesus had just been up with Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, where he'd changed and Peter wanted to pitch the tent, you know he wanted to stay there on the mountaintop? Well they came down and they found a father and his boy, and this boy had an evil spirit that harmed him, threw him into the fire and did all kinds of ugly things to him. And the disciples had not been able to cast the demon out, and so Jesus says to the dad, "Do you believe I can cast out the demon?" Can I heal your boy? And the dad was really honest, I love this man. You know he'd been to every physician, every healer that he knew and nobody had helped him; Jesus disciples couldn't do it. He was really honest with him,

he said, “I don’t know. Yes? I believe? I think? Would you just help me believe?” And in Steve’s translation, Jesus said, “That’ll do.” And He healed him! The man wasn’t an icon for powerful faith!

But even a better example, think of our Savior, Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane. Do you remember what He prayed? “Father, if it would be Your will, would you let this cup pass from me?” Talking about the cross. Jesus was fervent. It says, that His sweat was like great drops of blood. He was a fervent pray-er, could we also say that Jesus being a great example for us, has perfect faith? You don’t get faith better than what Jesus had. What did His Father say? He said, “No. There is no other way.” And Jesus said, “Okay.” Do you see? Jesus was the perfect example of faith and He asked, and the Father said no. So whatever prayer of faith means, it cannot mean if I have enough faith, God has to do what I want him to do. It just doesn’t.

It may mean that the elders are praying a very specific prayer of restoration. Do you ever find yourself praying: “God bless this person?” Well how are you going to know if God’s going to answer that prayer? How do you know? I think it’s still okay to pray that, but there’s so much more power in a specific prayer. “God will you heal this person of this disease?” “Will you restore this person’s spiritual energy?” Speaking specifically, remember we’re talking about physical illness, but we’re also talking about spiritual, emotional, and mental weariness. The prayer of faith may be a very specific prayer, for a specific reason, for restoration and healing.

But it also may be a spiritual gift of faith. I point you to 1 Corinthians 12:8-9 “To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good.” Now this talking about the spiritual gifts, right? “For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to

another gifts of healing by the one Spirit.” Then again in the spiritual gifts section of 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14. In the love chapter, in verse 13:2, “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” I believe that it’s possible that God sometimes speaks to our understanding and gives extraordinary assurance that we have what we’ve asked for.

I mean, it should be obvious from what I’ve said before, I’m not talking about generating self-talk here. I’m talking about the Holy Spirit actually giving assurance to our spirits. I know God often heals His people, sometimes through medical means, and sometimes through supernatural means, either in a moment or over a given amount of time. I know that God often uses prayer as a means to bring about that healing. If we believe that God communicates to His people, would it not be possible that sometimes He would communicate His will beforehand to give extreme assurance that what we’re asking for, we have? That’s kind of what we talked about in Hebrews 11 with faith, isn’t it? “The assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Is it possible that sometimes He reveals what He’s going to do before He does it, so that He gets even more glory and that we can act by faith? I think it’s reasonable, certainly not always, maybe not often, but sometimes. And it’s just as reasonable that He uses leaders. Who better than the shepherds of the flock to be the channel of blessing, of both communication and healing? So maybe could the prayer of faith be given to the shepherds for extraordinary assurance?

So, the prayer of faith may mean that God somehow reveals to the shepherds that He intends to heal someone. They may not know why they think so, they just know. You say, “Steve that, that makes me uncomfortable.” I know. It sounds so subjective, they could be wrong, how

are you going to verify if that's true? All of that, I know, and I understand. But I guess, guys, I'm at the point in my life that I'm willing to embrace a little bit of mystery and feel like I don't have it all nailed down. So, maybe in ways I can't explain or understand, God gives assurance that what you're praying for, He's going to do. Then you can pray the prayer of faith and trust Him.

As we move on, "and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Now this just blows you out of the water, doesn't it? Wait, we've been talking about healing, we've been talking about prayer, okay got that. Now, does he lose his train of thought? When he says, "if he has committed sins he will be forgiven"? Now, we said previously that sickness, oh by the way, I don't think so. We said previously that sickness can be interpreted not only as physical illness, but also weakness – emotional, spiritual, mental weakness – being weary and depressed with the cares of the day. I believe it includes both. I think the Scripture teaches that sometimes physical illness and certainly emotional anxiety and weariness of the soul can be caused by a refusal to confess, repent, and abandon your sins. Not always, but sometimes. Spiritual health we know, affects both physical and emotional health, and vice versa. We are complicated beings. But physical ailments may be caused or aggravated by sin in our life. Maybe that colitis is because I'm angry. Maybe headaches are because I'm sinfully worrying and fretting; I'm so stressed out that I have a headache. Sometimes ulcers can be caused or aggravated by fear or an anxious heart.

Now hear me, I'm not saying that it's always that way; please hear me. If you're suffering from an ailment, I am not for a moment saying that it's because of sin. Do you hear me? Nod your head. Okay, everybody hears me saying that. I'm not saying your ailment is caused or aggravated by sin, but I'm saying that it could be. That it's possible. So, the natural thing, the thing that is

logical to me, that when I'm having physical problems and if I know that there's sin in my life that I haven't been willing to let go of, to abandon, maybe now's the time. Don't refuse to accept the grace and forgiveness of God, because it does affect you, in some way. It is a lie from the pit that you can cultivate your sin and remain in it and enjoy it over time, and it not hurt you.

So, pray when, pray with, pray for. The first part of verse 16: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed." Guys, we're called to pray for one another. In light of the fact that sometimes my sin is what is making me sick or weary of heart, in light of that, James says "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another." It's what a Jesus following community does. That means that we take off the masks and we're a little bit open with one another and say: "I'm struggling here. I'm wrestling here. And sometimes, I'm failing here." It's the willingness to be a little bit vulnerable with one another. Yes, you've got to trust the one that you're confessing to. But gosh, if we can't trust one another, we've got problems, right? And then, if you confess your sin then you have someone else to support you.

This is a beautiful picture of what it means to be a church: the hands and feet of Jesus. You see, being a Jesus community is not primarily about how well we know our theology. It's not primarily about how great the worship is on Sunday, although it includes both of those things. Being a church is primarily the recognition that we belong to one another, and that we care for one another by praying for one another. Isn't that what a church is? We really do have to fight the fact that in our culture today we tend to be an individualized society. I mean, it goes all the way back to de Toqueville when our country was founded. He says: "They are rugged individualists." Well we tend to be rugged individualists spiritually. Think about the language

that we use! We tend to practice our faith in isolation, and we say: “Okay well I had my personal Bible study, and my personal prayer and my personal obedience and my personal walk.” All those things are important, but if we end there, we’ve missed our calling. The calling to be a church. It’s really not about me, it’s about us.

So, we confess our sins. I’ve found it interesting here, that he tells us to confess our sins to one another, instead of confessing our sins to God. Now isn’t that interesting? I wouldn’t have anticipated that. If I was writing it, I probably wouldn’t have written it that way. It’s a good thing I wasn’t the writer, but lo I digress. The word confess here means ‘to ratify or confirm.’ I confirm. So, when I confess my sins, I agree with someone that what I did was wrong. In this context, it seems like he’s speaking about our relationships with one another. So, if we think, if I confess my sins to God, then I am agreeing with His word that what He says is wrong, is wrong. So, in terms of relationships, if I’m confessing my sin and agreeing and affirming together, it may be then that the sin was against one of my brothers, and I go to my brother or my sister, and I agree with them that what I did as wrong. We confirm together: “Yes what I did was wrong,” and then I ask him to pray for me that I might not do it again, that this may not be the spirit that I have, do you see? When I agree with someone about my sin, and then I ask them to pray for me, that kind of reconciliation is powerful. To humble yourself before your brother and say, “I wronged you and I am sorry, will you forgive me? Now will you pray for me that I don’t ever do that again?” Understanding these truths is so important, I’ll just say, during the month of September, we are going to do a short series about Blessed are the Peacemakers and we’re going to go through some of these principles. But it may be, James is pointing to the fact that there is

some strife between some brothers and sisters in the family, and he says, confess your sins to one another.

And finally, and quickly. Pray and walk. Verses 16-18 “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 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.” This is just pray and walk with God. I think this is what a righteous person does. He just walks with God. Prayer is a powerful influence in the world. Things change when God’s people pray. People are healed. Relationships mended.

Now let me just say, there are some who say, “But Steve, God is sovereign over His universe, and He has foreordained all things to come to pass. Everything happens according to His purpose, and His plan, for the good of His people and His glory. So, Steve, why does it matter if I pray? He’s going to do it anyway.” Have you ever been told that? Have you ever thought that? Over and over I’ve encountered people that feel that way. So, they say, “Steve how does my prayer change anything? Why bother?” Well, I guess I give my stock answer. I say: “I don’t know. I just know it’s true.” My warning to them, my warning is to be careful and don’t get more spiritual than God. Don’t become more Calvinistic than God. He tells us to pray, so I pray. He tells me that prayer makes a difference, so I pray, and I believe Him because He’s said to pray. Ask and you shall receive. By golly, that’s what I’m going to do.

I don’t have to understand how it all plays out. If He tells me to do it, that’s good enough for me. I don’t have to understand. All I know is that prayer is a powerful force in the world when it’s uttered by a person who is seeking to know Jesus and to forsake their sin and to obey

His commands and love others. That's a righteous man, by the way. I love the example of Elijah, because it gives me hope. Elijah was a powerful guy; he did amazing things. He called down fire from heaven, he'd done all those kind of things. But at other times, he was a puddle on the floor. So, I can identify at least with a puddle on the floor! But he says, "He's just a man like me. Just like you." But he prayed fervently, and it didn't rain for three and a half years! And he prayed, and then it rained. Those are powerful prayers. I want to pray those kind of prayers, don't you? Don't you want to see God move powerfully in response to your prayers?