

James: Pray Always

James 5:13-18

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

November 24, 2002

If You have your Bibles, I'd invite You to turn with me to James chapter 5. We are coming to the end of this book and our study of it, and next week Lord willing we will finish looking at the final two verses.

Now as we've looked at James 4 verse 11 to James 5 verse 6, which is in the previous section of this book, we have said that that portion of James deals with worldliness, and James is concerned to show how worldliness shows itself in our speech and in our attitude toward and use of wealth or money. And he has used those as diagnosis. A friend of mine was saying to me not long ago, "Your know, you sure do find out a lot about a man when you go to a football game with him." Ouch! That hurt. You get an unedited version in certain circumstances of a person's heart reflected in speech, and that is exactly what James is saying. He is saying that our speech in various ways is indicative of what's going on in our hearts. And in the same way, when you in the shopping mall, or when you are making judgments about the use of money you are getting a little bit of an unedited version of what's going on in the heart. That's exactly what James is after in what he says in James 4:11 through 5:6. That's the second to last section of the book and we've spent several weeks looking that passage.

Now when we moved to James 5:7 last week, we actually moved into the final portion of the book because beginning in James 5:7, James is giving, as it were, parting words. These are the words that speakers call 'my concluding remarks.' For James, they are short, punchy, practical, powerful, exhortations which he wants to leave ringing in the ears and in the hearts of the Christians to whom he has been speaking and, not surprisingly, as we've seen James do before in this book, he actually goes back in these final words to things which he spoke about at the very beginning of the book.

For instance, if you look back at the passage we studied last week James 5:7-12, you will note that the theme is patience. Well, how did James open the book? By talking about patience. And so James is going to take us back to some themes he opened with in this book and that's the method of a good teacher. He repeats important things that are to be known.

So that brings us today's passage beginning in James 5:13 and going down through verse 18. It is a passage which is fundamentally about prayer. Let's hear God's holy and inspired word then, from James 5.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. 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 offered in faith will restore the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 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. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again and the sky poured rain and the earth produced fruits.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

O Lord we ask now in prayer that You would help us not only to understand but to believe and embrace about prayer what You teach us yourself here in this word. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

This passage has main message which is crystal clear. But it is in fact one of the most difficult passages in the little book of James. It's also one of the most controversial passages in the book of James. This passage has often been used to justify what some churches call *auricular confession*. That is confession of our sins through a priest. It's been used to justify the practice of what is called extreme unction or last rites where a priest anoints and prays with a specific form of words over someone who is dying. It's also been appealed to by faith healers. But a closer look will reveal that James is teaching us instead here, that prayer is a means of grace, it's a divinely appointed instrument whereby we receive the benefits of God's fatherly mercy.

Indeed, as we have already seen in this passage James is returning to a pattern which he revealed to us in James chapter 1. Let me ask you to turn to James chapter 1 and look at verses 3-5. In that passage and it's larger context, you will see James speak about patience and prayer. He calls on us as Christians to endure our trials. He's calling us to be patient and he calls on us to do so with prayer and even with rejoicing.

Notice in this passage if you look at James 5 verses 7-12, patience is mentioned seven times and in verses 13-18 prayer is mentioned seven times. So James is going back to a pattern which he introduced us to at the very beginning of the book: how do we as Christians hang on in the midst of trial. He doesn't only say,

be patient. He also says pray. As someone said to me at the door of the church after the early service, so what you're saying is, James' message is "hang on and call for air support." Well, yes, something like that. It's not only to persevere with a patient endurance that looks for the coming of Christ, to weather every storm with that forward looking gaze set on the coming of Jesus Christ, but it is also to do so expressing your faith manifestly in God's sovereign and good providence for you by praying to Him, showing your trust in Him by prayer. And so we see patience and prayer combined again.

And I want you to see four things in this passage. In verse 13 I want you to see the praying Christian. In verses 14 and 15, I want you to see the praying elders. In the first phrase or sentence in verse 16, I want you to see praying friends. And then in the second half of verse 16 down to verse 18, I want you to see the praying prophet. Let's look at these things together.

I. The whole of the Christian life is to be lived in communion with God, the good and the bad, manifested by prayer.

In verse 13 we see the praying Christian. James' message is very clear here. It gets harder later on but this message is very clear: in every circumstance of life, pray. The whole of the Christian life is to be lived in the communion with God. The good and the bad in the Christian life is to be lived in communion with God. The joyful and the heartbreaking in the Christian life is to be lived in communion with God. And that communion with God in good times and in bad times is to be manifested by prayer. Listen to what James says, "Is anyone among you suffering?" What's the response? Then let him pray. "Is anyone cheerful, are things going well, has God blessed you beyond you imagination?" What's the proper response? "Let him sing praises." James' response to suffering to the Christian is not simply to say, "Be patient or hang on," but rather to practically entrust yourself to the care of the almighty God, and there's only one way to do that: prayer. His point is, then, that prayer is always appropriate. It's always appropriate to pray. Remember what Dr. Lloyd-Jones used to say, "The one urge which should never be resisted is the urge to pray." There are lots of urges in life that need to be resisted, but the urge to pray should never be resisted, but rather cultivated, and that's what James is saying, prayer is always appropriate. Pray when you're suffering, praise when you rejoice and sing when you are cheerful, he says. In periods of trouble, in times of rejoicing, prayer and praise acknowledge that God is sufficient to help us. Trusting Him and acknowledging Him as the giver as every good gift.

You remember the hymn called "Through All The Changing Scenes of Life," that we sing from time to time. It's actually based on a psalm but the first line goes like this, "Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy, the praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue employ." That's what the psalmist is singing about. No matter what is happening in life, we should pray

and praise God. James is calling on us in suffering to pray, and in plenty and cheerful rejoicing to praise.

Why? Because the Christian life is to be consecrated by prayer to God so that every pleasure is hallowed and every pain is sanctified. We are to so live the Christian life that every pleasure is made holy by our acknowledging that it comes from the hand of our loving heavenly Father. "Lord I don't deserve these children that You've given me, I praise You. Lord, I don't deserve this wife, this husband that You've given me, and so I praise You. Lord, I don't deserve this job that You've given me, I love it, and so I praise You. Lord, I didn't deserve the financial windfall that I've received this year even when other people are going through really tough economic times and so I praise You. Lord, I don't deserve the kinds of friends You've given me and so I praise You." And the examples go on and on. In every season of rejoicing it is to be hallowed with praise.

But James doesn't just say that that's the case in seasons of rejoicing. He says that's to be the case in times of suffering. That we are to pray to the Lord in those seasons of suffering, Lord, I never thought I'd bury my own child and so I'm turning to Your for strength. Lord I never thought I'd hold the lifeless body of my own child in my arms and so I'm turning to Your in prayer for grace and strength. Lord, I never thought that I'd be among the jobless, but here I am having been laid off or fired. Lord I never knew that I would be in a miserable marriage, but here I am and I'm turning to Your for strength. Lord, I had no idea that I'd be coming to Your praying with a broken heart over children who have gone away from the Lord and are living apart from His rule, but here I am before Your. Lord I never knew that I'd be in a broken home, but I'm turning to Your. James is saying that in every circumstance of life, we must go to the Lord in prayer.

Calvin says it beautifully, "There is no time in which God does not invite us to Himself." And that's what James is making a point of saying. Even in the extremes of life, in cheerfulness and in unbearable sorrow, we are to go to the Lord in prayer. God wants us to talk to Him at all times. In trouble He is our comforter; in joy He is the giver of all joy, and in going to Him in prayer we hallow every pleasure and we sanctify every pain.

Alec Motyer has this beautiful sentence where He says, "Our whole life should be so angled towards God that whatever strikes upon us, whether sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into His presence." That's exactly what James is saying in this passage, the whole of the Christian life is to be lived in communion with God, the good and the bad, and that communion is to be manifested in prayer. In every circumstance, brothers, pray. He's saying I'm not only calling on Your to endure to whether the storms of life by looking ahead to the coming of Christ. I am calling on Your to call on the heavenly Father, to help Your in both the blessings of life, not to forget him, and in the storms of life, not to mistrust His goodness. That's the first thing that James is saying as He addresses the praying Christian. What should the praying Christian do in every

circumstance? Praise and pray.

II. The Christian life is one of community and is dependent on the Spirit.

Now I'd like you to look at verses 14 and 15 and see the praying elders. Now this is where the passage really gets hard. In this passage we see, however, something very clear, James' instruction to us that in times of dire need, we need to show our dependence first on the communion of the saints and second upon God. And what better way to do that than to call upon the elders as the leaders, the shepherds, the pastors of the communion of the saints as representative of that totality of the communion of the saints to come and call down God's help in time of need.

James is reminding us in verses 14 and 15 that the Christian life is a life of community. It's not just about an individual Jesus and His Bible. It's about life in a community of believers all of whom are helping on another, who are assisting one another, who are encouraging one another to love and good deeds, who are praying with and for one another and who are seeking to live together as heirs of the grace of life. So the Christian life is one of community. And so it makes sense that there are certain times when you don't simply need another Christian to pray with you, but you need the communion of saints to be represented, to be praying with and for you.

And furthermore the Christian life is one which is dependent upon the Lord, it's dependent upon the work of the Spirit, and what better way to manifest that reliance, on the one hand in the communion of the saints, and that reliance on the other hand on the Lord, than to call the elders together to pray for you in a very serious circumstance.

James' word is in verse 14. If you are seriously ill, what should you do? Call for the elders to pray for you. And he links this healing and prayer and the elders and God's divine intervention. Now let me say very quickly this passage has been used to justify the doctrine of last rites, the sacrament of extreme unction, and I would just simply say in passing, that this passage doesn't speak to that at all. Last rites are said over somebody who is dying. This passage looks to the hopeful prospect of this person restored to health, praying so that you will get well. This isn't about last rites at all. Furthermore it doesn't talk about priests or even the minister coming and administering this prayer, it talks about the elders coming and giving this prayer.

Now there are several questions in this passage, one is, "How sick do you have to be before you call the elders?" Another is, "What is this stuff about 'the prayer of faith will restore you'?" Your mean when the elders pray for you it always gets answered? And then, "What's this business about, 'and you'll have your sins forgiven'?" Does that mean that all health problems are the result of your

personal sin?

Let's see if we can touch them very quickly. We'll start at the beginning. How sick do you have to be before you call for the elders? Well, obviously, this passage makes it clear, this is a pretty serious circumstance. If we had to have the elders pray for everything, then the elders would be fairly busy doing that and nothing else. So, this is a fairly serious circumstance. How do we know that? We'll look at five things in this passage. One, notice that the elders come to this person, apparently this person is sick enough that he's not able to come to the elders. The elders go visit this person.

Secondly notice that the elders do all the praying here. There's no indication that this person is joining in with the praying; it's the elders that are doing the praying.

Thirdly, the term that James uses for *sick* indicates that it's either a prolonged or a very grave illness.

Fourth, notice that in this passage, in contrast to Jesus' healing passages in the gospels, the sick person is not called upon to exercise faith. Remember, so often when Jesus was about to heal a person, He would call upon that person to believe. Well, there's no mention of that in this passage. Now that doesn't mean that this person shouldn't exercise faith, but apparently the indication is that the person is at such a low point, that nothing is being asked of this person other than they have called the elders to come pray for them.

And then finally, notice that there's this very interesting phrase used for the elder's prayer. They are not asked to pray with the sick person, they are asked to pray *over* the sick person. So all of that adds up to a very serious circumstance. In our congregation, though, sometimes a person is physically capable to coming to pray with the elders, and has occurred with advanced cancer and other similar circumstances. Clearly a grave illness or condition is in view.

What about this issue of the prayer of faith will restore him. Does that mean that every time the elders pray, that the prayer is answered by the person's healing. Now we really could use a couple of weeks to elaborate this point, but let me just mention a few things. First of all, notice that James has just said in the immediate context that it is presumptuous in our speech to say that something is going to happen without saying "if the Lord wills."

Secondly, let me remind you that when Jesus was teaching you how to pray, one of the fundamental things that He said that you needed to pray was, *Thy will be done*. We have had a minister of our congregation rebuked by a person for saying, "If the Lord wills." He was right, and they were wrong. It's never inappropriate to pray, *Lord willing*. It's never inappropriate to pray, *If the Lord wills*. It's never inappropriate to pray, *Thy will be done*. And so 'the prayer of faith will restore' does not contradict or replace Jesus and James' emphasis of praying

Thy will be done and If the Lord wills. That's the fundamental thing I want to say about this. Whatever that passage means, it is not a contradiction of the principle that we always pray in submission of the Lord. And one of the beautiful truths about that, my friends, is that God does not answer our prayers as we pray them, but as we would pray them if we were wiser. That is one of the mercies of being a child of God. That He answers our prayers better than we pray them. And if we only were able to call down the answer we wanted, it would not mean that we would have more blessing from God, it would mean we would have less blessing from God.

Now, what about this relationship between forgiveness of sin and healing? Is all physical malady connected with personal sin? Well again, James and Jesus clearly make it clear to us that this is not the case. In the case of the man who Jesus was about to heal and the disciples say to Jesus, "Is this man diseased because of something that he did or because of something that his parents did?" And Jesus' response is, "Neither." Now, Jesus of course doesn't say that there is never ever a connection between physical malady and spiritual sin and rebellion. But what He does say is that certainly in that case it's not the case, that the man's personal sin did not bring malady upon him, and therefore we cannot say universally that sin is the root cause of all physical problems.

But there is a link here between forgiveness and healing. And that link between forgiveness and healing, perhaps, is in the fact that so often it is on the sick bed that we engage in self examination and take account, and we realize our sin and perhaps even in that context we desire to get right with others. The very fact that in the next verse James is going to talk about the restoration of relationship between friends in Christ who have been estranged suggests that that is a proper connection between forgiveness and healing. It's not that the person is always sick because they've sinned, it's that physical sickness often reminds us of our spiritual sicknesses and our need to be healed spiritually, to get forgiveness or to extend forgiveness, or have reconciliation occur with a brethren, or to get right with God. And so, this may indeed explain some of these linkages in James 5:14 and 15. But the big point of James is clear. When you are facing this grave illness, call on the elders of the church. It's a way of expressing your confidence that God blesses through His people, hears the prayers of His people, and is the one you need in your hour of need.

III. There is no reality more contradictory of what God is doing in the Church than division between brothers and sisters in Christ, so pray that it may be remedied.

Thirdly, if You look at verse 16, we'll see praying friends. Not only the praying Christian in verse 13, not only the praying elders in verses 14 and 15, but praying friends. And these are praying friends who have run into a bit of relational problem, they are estranged. Maybe one has said something about the other that

has brought a rift. Maybe there has been a disagreement over a business transaction or some other relational problem, but these friends are estranged and so James says "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed."

Now, I want you to notice here that James does not say "Go confess your sins to somebody else." He doesn't say go confess your sins to a priest, for instance, nor does he say get together in your small group and talk about the problem that you and your friend have had. He says, "Go to your friend." This is you going to the person from whom you are estranged and seeking to bring about reconciliation. You are looking to extend forgiveness and to be forgiven and to bring about a restoration of relationship and so you are confessing here to the one who you've offended. And you are praying for one another that you may be healed.

Your know, there is no reality more contradictory to what God is doing in the Church than division between brothers and sisters in Christ. And James is saying, if that's the case in your instance, pray that that would be remedied. My pastor as a boy had a standing practice that if there were people in the congregation who were estranged from one another and he came to know about it, he would ask them both to come and to kneel with him on the floor in his office and pray together. And many many times I saw that become the root of not only a restored relationship, but a strengthened relationship, where those two people loved one another, more than they had ever loved one another because they had confessed to one another and they had prayed for one another and they had been restored.

IV. The Christian must believe that God is able and that prayer is his instrument.

Finally, James knows that praying in times of suffering and remembering to praise God in good times, and praying when we are gravely ill, and praying in the case of a broken personal relationship, can tax our faith in God, and so in verses 16 through 18 he gives a picture, a picture of the praying prophet Elijah. And in the picture he is showing you the power of prayer because he knows that you will be tempted to say, "This relationship is too far gone. There's no way, there's no way that it's going to be restored." And what do you do,? You discount the power of prayer. "My illness is just too far advanced. There's just nothing that can happen here in response to the elders' praying." And so He gives this picture of Elijah, who was a fallible person like we are, and that fallibility is very apparent on the pages of Scripture and yet, when Elijah prayed, it didn't rain in the country where he was for three and a half years. And then he prayed again and it poured. And James' point is this, "Don't ever discount prayer, don't ever underestimate the power of prayer." Do you really believe in prayer? Does your daily prayer life reflect that you really believe in prayer? James is saying that in every

circumstance in life, our response is to pray. Never discount the power of prayer as a means of grace. Let us pray.

O Lord we believe. Help our unbelief and then let us pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).