



## November 16, 2008

### Prayer... When? How?

### James 5:13-18

#### MINISTERING HELPS

##### Group Prayer

Today, you might want to save your prayer time for the end as an application part of the lesson. In the lesson we talk about praying in FAITH, believing that God can and will work on our behalf. It should change the way your group thinks about their praying today.

##### Stay Connected

Hopefully your class is planning a Christmas fellowship. Make sure that you let your associate members (those who are teaching our kids) know and give them special recognition at your party. Also, if you don't have associate members, adopt some kids' teachers your group knows and invite them to be your special guests.

#### REACHING HELPS

1. Ask your group to name three groups of people each of them associates with on a weekly basis that are not family or church.
2. Have them write them on a piece of paper. Next, ask them how many total people these three groups represent.
3. Finally, mention that around 50% of Americans are unchurched. Have them take half of the total people in their three groups and call out that number.
4. Total up the numbers of all your group members and talk about that number in light of our call to be Great Commission Christians.

#### TEACHING HELPS

Pastor Chad continues the sermon series on Prayer today with a look at the wonderful benefits that come to us when we become a praying people.

We have talked in past weeks about how we have ritualized prayer. When is it a right time to pray? How should I talk to God about these things?

Today's lesson will point out some times we need to be quick to pray and how faith is a key element in a vibrant prayer life.

# Prayer... When? How?

James 5:13-18

In college I was a decent student, but there were two classes that I failed during my university studies. One was Spanish, the other class ... piano!



In Spanish, I could read and write the language fairly well, but trying to speak it created mental shutdowns for me that I could not easily overcome. In piano, I could play the left hand by itself well, and also the right hand part. But when I tried to do both at the same time, it wasn't easy and my performances consistently had great musicians of the past turning over in their graves.

Of course, I think I could have done a lot better at both if I had done more practicing. Not that I didn't practice at all, but my practicing was never regular and never long enough in either discipline. So when it was time to play my song or speak the language, I wasn't comfortable in doing it because I hadn't done it enough outside of class.

Seems like prayer is a lot like that for people. When they really know they need to be praying about something important, they don't feel comfortable about it because they don't do it regularly. They feel guilty for their "911" prayers, because they know they don't do enough "411" praying.

And beside the question of WHEN we pray, the question of HOW crops up. What is the right formula for prayer? Do I talk to Him in the King James version or should I just speak casually as if we were at Starbucks together.

And if the proof is in the pudding, why does it seem our prayers at times aren't getting past the ceiling? Sometimes we get what we want, and other times we don't! What's the deal?

James 5:13-18 is not going to tell us everything we need to know about prayer, but it may answer some of the When? and How? questions and raise our comfort level in connecting to God through prayer.

## 1. Some thoughts on WHEN to pray... (v13-14)

<sup>13</sup>Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>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. *James 5:13-14 (NIV)*

### Teaching Points

#### Introduction...

1. Set the tone for this study on prayer by asking some of the following questions...

- If on a scale of 1-10, 1 is prayerless and 10 is praying perfection, where do you rank? Why would you give yourself this rank?
- What is the best part of your prayer life? What part(s) of your prayer life need the most work?
- When do most people choose to pray?
- Is there a wrong time to pray?
- Is there a wrong way to pray?

Mention that there is no passage that gives us everything we need to know about prayer. By studying the entire Bible, we can learn exactly what our prayer lives need to look like.

Today, we look at a passage on prayer from James who gives us some clues about when and how to pray.

James closes his letter as he began it, with a call to prayer. James uses his closing words to describe effective prayer. He details prayer in several forms (praise, intercession, confession) and connects prayer with several other important spiritual disciplines (healing, confession, anointing, correction, praise, and mutual forgiveness). If we can say that James's letter summarizes the work of faith, his conclusion focuses on faith's finest work—believers effective in prayer.

**5:13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray.**<sup>NRSV</sup> There are many responses to trouble. Some of us worry; some of us vow revenge against those who have caused the trouble; some of us let anger burn inside us. Some grumble. But James says the correct response to trouble is to pray (see also [Psalm 30](#); [50:15](#); [91:15](#)). This is not necessarily a prayer for deliverance from the trouble, but for the patience and strength to endure it.

**There are three main reasons for not praying when we realize we are in trouble: ignorance, arrogance, and shame.** If we do not know that God wants us to pray when we are in trouble, we are simply ignorant of Scripture. If we do not pray when we are in trouble because we are trusting in our own resources to get ourselves out, we are being arrogant. And

sometimes we may want to pray but are ashamed because the trouble we are in is our own fault. James gives permission and encouragement to those who are ignorant. He urges submission to those who are arrogant. And he reminds those who are ashamed that God is full of compassion and mercy ([5:11](#)). To all of us he commends prayer.

### **THE BENEFIT OF SINGING**

Almost every Sunday, we unconsciously apply [James 5:13](#). The use of hymn singing in worship is not merely to create a mood, allow people to stand and stretch, or provide a break between the spoken parts—hymn singing is a form of prayer. It ought to be composed, played, and sung with devotion. We should think of what we are singing and sing with joyful reverence. Whether it is our song, or one composed by another, our expression of the words ought to be genuine. By its nature, music allows us to come as close as possible to praising God in perfect union. Perhaps not every person is happy, but the joyful expression of a few may actually be what God uses to lift the spirits of those who are broken or lost.

### **1. When to pray (v. 13-14)**

- Have someone read the entire passage (v13-18).
- In verses 13-14, James mentions 3 times to pray. What are they?
- Trouble or suffering is the first “time to pray” mentioned. Is prayer the first thing we do when we realize we are in trouble? What other things do we do that might not be as productive?
- The commentary mentions three main reasons for not praying when we realize we are in trouble. Using the commentary, talk about these three reasons and explain them to the group. Ask the group to share from their experiences which of these they are most vulnerable to.
- The next “time to pray” mentioned is when we are cheerful. Where do the good things that make us cheerful come from? What does it say to God if we don't think of or speak to Him in the midst of good times?
- I thought this was about prayer. Why did he start talking about singing? If prayer is equivalent to singing, how do you think God feels about our Worship services? Do you think most of us see the singing of hymns as praying to God? What could we do to make our praise/praying better?
- Another “time to pray” mentioned is when someone is sick.
  - What kind of “sick” do you think it means here?
  - Can only the elders pray for the sick? Why do you think it says to call them to pray? Are the prayers of elders more special than your prayers?
  - What about the “anointing with oil?” What is the purpose of that? What does the oil represent?
  - Have you ever been prayed for when you were really sick? Have you ever been a part of a special prayer time for healing? How did it make you feel?

## USE OF OIL

Many ceremonies and actions (such as fasting and baptism) were so well known among the early Christians that specific instructions are not always included. The same is true with anointing. We don't know what kind of oil this was, or how exactly it was administered. The only hint we get is a delightful description in one of the Psalms that fits nicely with the themes that James is emphasizing here: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore" ([Psalm 133:1-3](#) NIV).

**Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.**<sup>NRSV</sup> James says that if we are fortunate enough to be happy, we should thank God by singing songs of praise (see also [1 Corinthians 14:15](#); [Ephesians 5:19](#); [Colossians 3:16](#)). Because our praise is directed to God, singing is actually another form of prayer. These songs of praise can be the formal Psalms from the Old Testament, or spontaneous personal creations that express some aspect of God's character or our response to him.

The quicker we are to blame God for misfortune, the slower we are to praise God when good things happen. Some of us take our happiness too lightly. We accept it as if it is our due or simply the product of our efforts. In happiness, it is easy to forget God. But a real appreciation of happy times will lead us to recognizing their source. If prayer is to be our constant communication with God, then happy times should naturally add rhythm and music to our expressions of thanks and praise to him.

**5:14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders.**<sup>NRSV</sup> One characteristic of the early church was its concern

over and care for the sick. Here James encourages the sick person to call for the elders of the church for counseling and prayer. The elders were spiritually mature men who were responsible for overseeing local churches (see [1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). These men would **pray over** the sick person, calling upon the Lord for healing. Then they would **anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord** (NIV). Jesus himself instructed us to pray in his name ([John 14:14](#)). As the elders pray for this one who is sick, they are to voice clearly that the power for healing resides in the name of Jesus.

Many of the details in this passage have to be consciously applied in our own age. James wrote to people in rather small communities, bound tightly by language and culture. We live in communities marked by isolation—even from people living next door. The early church practiced house calls. Contact, prayer, appeals to the presence and power of God, expectations of God's direct intervention, and healing were part of daily life. The life of faith really was a life-style, not a weekend component of a compartmentalized life that fits God into one's weekly schedule for a couple of hours on Sunday mornings. A literal practice by church leaders of James's guidelines for healing prayer would make churches much more personal and effective.

The sick person here is incapacitated physically. Anointing was often used by the early church in their prayers for healing. In Scripture, oil was both a medicine (see the parable of the Good Samaritan in [Luke 10:30-37](#)) and a symbol of the Spirit of God (as used in anointing kings; see [1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)). Thus the oil may have been a sign of the power of prayer, and it may have symbolized the setting apart of the sick person for God's special attention. More important than the oil itself, however, the key function of the elders is their prayer for the sick person, as evidenced in the verses that follow.

—Life Application Bible Commentary

## 2. *Some thoughts on HOW to pray... (v15-18)*

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

*James 5:13-18 (NIV)*

**5:15 The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.**<sup>NIV</sup> The prayer must be from the heart, sincere, with trust in and obedience to God behind it, and with no doubting, as in [1:5-8](#). The believing is the role of the elders who are praying, not the sick person's (nothing is said about his or her faith). It is possible that the sick person's faith is exercised in calling the elders. Also, if there is need for confession, the elders will be able to minister to the individual. The process insures dependence of believers on each other.

**The Lord will raise him up.**<sup>NKJV</sup> Not the elders or the oil, but the Lord himself does the healing. Does this mean that every prayer for healing guarantees that God will make the sick person well? It must be emphasized here that the prayer offered is a prayer offered in faith—not only the faith that believes God can heal, but also the faith that expresses absolute confidence in God's will. A true prayer of faith will acknowledge God's sovereignty in his answer to that prayer. It is not always God's will to heal those who are ill (see [2 Corinthians 12:7-9](#)). A prayer for healing must be qualified with a recognition that God's will is supreme.

It is shameful to find Christians hesitating to pray because God might not heal the way they wish. It is not our role either to decide how God will answer our prayers or to excuse him if our human desires are not met. Trusting God only as long as he cooperates with our plans is no trust at all. The prayer offered in faith gives God a free hand to work. Because believers have an eternal viewpoint, we can claim the absolute certainty of this promise—God can and will heal, though not always in this world. In the afterlife God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" ([Revelation 21:4](#) NIV). To limit God's answers only to this world would indicate that we are trying to make God submit to our needs and desires in this life rather than submitting to him.

Jesus chided human attempts to measure faith. He pictured the strongest faith as no bigger than a mustard seed. To the disciples' questions about unanswered prayers Jesus replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" ([Matthew 17:20](#) NIV). Clearly the size of our faith in God is not important; rather, it is the character of the God in whom our faith rests that makes the difference.

An overemphasis on our faith's involvement places too much responsibility on our capacity to know God's plan in the matter. But if we have a small faith that simply trusts in a wise, merciful, and powerful God to do what is best, we will see miracles happen.

**If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.**<sup>NIV</sup> Sin may or may not be the cause of the illness, but an opportunity for confession is given, and the elders are there to receive it. No demand of confession is given; James uses the

## 2. How to Pray... (v15-18)

- The prayer for the sick transitions us from "when to pray" to helps on "how to pray." A key HOW is pointed out in verse 15. It says that our prayers should be offered in FAITH. Let's discuss what this means...
  - In verse 15, who does the raising of the sick? And who are we praying to? So praying for the sick is connecting them to God? How is this like the story of the friends who carried their sick friend to Jesus in Mark 2?
  - Is there a difference in having faith in something happening (the sick getting well) and having faith in someone being able to do something about it (God)? Our faith should be in someone NOT something happening. How should this truth impact the way we pray? How does this truth relate to the way Jesus prayed in Luke 22:42?
  - Does all sickness come from sin? Why do you think James talked about this in verses 15-16?
  - The prayer of faith starts with a heart that has been cleansed by God. Why should we confess our sins to one another? Should we confess ALL our sins to everyone? Who should we confess to and what should we confess?
- What kind of pray-er was Elijah? Make sure everyone knows the story found in [1 Kings 17:1-18:46](#). Do you believe that you could be a praying person like Elijah? Do you believe that your prayers could be powerful and effective?

## WHAT ABOUT WEAK FAITH?

The emphasis on the prayer offered in faith in James gives rise to questions such as, Does the quality of faith matter? What if my faith is too weak? What if not enough elders show up? What if the elders' faith is weak? Or even, I was completely confident God would answer my prayer, but the person wasn't healed—what did I do wrong?

These are important questions. Sometimes prayer is offered for the sick with the hope that a specific healing request will happen. Our prayers should always connect those in need with God, who can be depended on to do what is best.

the entire church if needed, or confess in private (if more appropriate), and then have the church pray for him or her, the barriers that are erected between people could be torn down. There would no longer be the internal conflicts, and fellowship would be strong and supportive. Those who are sick **may be healed** (NRSV), and the church would be unified in its prayer efforts.

The recent emphasis on small groups within churches has risen largely from a need to recapture some of these basic features of life in the body of Christ that have been neglected. When Christians are really working to "carry each other's burdens," the world does take note, and we come closer to fulfilling "the law of Christ" (see [Galatians 6:2](#) NIV). Loving your neighbor as yourself does include, above all else, praying for him or her.

In Christ's kingdom, every believer is a priest to other believers ([1 Peter 2:9](#)). We must help others come to Christ and tell them of Christ's forgiveness.

**The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.**<sup>NRSV</sup>

The prayer is effective because the person who is praying is righteous. The person is not sinless, but he or she has confessed known sins to God and is completely committed to him and trying to do his will. Again, we can say that the righteous person gets what he or she wants in prayer because he wants what God wants.

word "if." This condition is important because all too often we are prone to assume that sin is the cause of someone's suffering. The Bible teaches that sin can cause sickness (see [Mark 2:1-12](#); [1 Corinthians 5:5](#); [11:27-30](#)), but it also notes clearly that this is not always the case (see [John 9:2-3](#)).

**5:16 Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.**<sup>NRSV</sup> It is not God's plan that his people be alone. Members of Christ's body should be able to count on others for support and prayer, especially when they are sick or suffering. The elders should be on call to respond to the illness of any member, and the church should stay alert to pray for the healing of any who are sick. But we are often not only guilty of hesitating to lean on each other in our sicknesses and weaknesses. We are even more liable not to confess our sins to each other.

Fellowship in our churches could be vastly improved if we could follow James's formula here. Confessing our sins—such as resentment, a grudge, lack of forgiveness, etc.—can and often does lead to the healing of physical ailments. Unresolved anger and guilt create real stress. If a believer could freely confess sin to someone whom he or she has wronged, confess publicly to

## WHY CONFESS SIN?

Christ has made it possible for us to go directly to God for forgiveness. But confessing our sins to one another still has an important place in the life of the church.

- If we have sinned against an individual, we must ask that person to forgive us.
- If our sin has affected the church, we must confess it publicly.
- If we need loving support as we struggle with a sin, we should confess the sin to those who are able to provide that support.
- If after confessing a private sin to God we still don't feel his forgiveness, we may wish to confess that sin to a fellow believer and hear him or her assure us of God's pardon

The Christian's most powerful resource is communication with God through prayer. It is the instrument of healing and forgiveness and is a mighty weapon for spiritual warfare. The results are often greater than we thought were possible. Some people see prayer as a last resort, to be tried when all else fails. Our priorities are the reverse of God's. Prayer should come first. Some see prayer as a way to obligate God to give whatever they claim in faith. God is pleased to use our prayers to accomplish his purposes and he delights in answering our needs, but he is never bound by our prayers. God's power is infinitely greater than ours, so it only makes sense to rely on it—especially because God encourages us to do so.

**5:17-18** **Elijah was . . . like us.**<sup>NRSV</sup> Prayer is indeed powerful—remember Elijah? The story is found in [1 Kings 17:1–18:46](#). Elijah had great power in prayer. A drought came as a sign to evil King Ahab of Israel that the idol Baal did not have power over the rain, God did. And when Elijah prayed, **it did not rain on the land for three and a half years**. Then he prayed for rain, **and the heavens gave rain** (NIV).

James uses Old Testament people to illustrate each of his major themes:

- The nature of faith is found in the lives of Abraham and Rahab ([2:21-25](#)).
- Perseverance is exemplified by Job ([5:11](#)).
- Effective prayer is exemplified by Elijah ([5:17-18](#)).

These lives are important to us. They are examples to be followed. When we choose all our models from contemporary people, we may eventually be disappointed by their failures. Other generations of believers cannot let us down. They made their mistakes, persevered, and are now testimonies that life can be lived for God. Hebrews reminds us, "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" ([Hebrews 12:1](#)).

### ***References....***

This week, all the commentary comes from the Life Application Bible Commentary.

### **Application Challenges...**

1. When trouble comes, do you worry and fret or do you pray? If you don't pray, is it because you are ignorant, arrogant or ashamed? What can we do if we are ignorant? What do we need to do if we are arrogant? What should we do if we are too ashamed to pray?
2. Praise to God should be a huge part of our prayer life. What could we do to provoke more prayers of praise in our lives? How should we apply this to the songs we sing in worship?
3. When we are sick or we pray for the sick, we are to get in tune with God, not try to get God in tune with us. Jesus prayed some "wants," but He followed them up with "nevertheless, thy will be done." He was not faith-less in doing this, but was showing that His faith was in God to do the right thing, not in what He wanted. This can be applied to praying for the sick. We need to think of ourselves as the four friends who brought their sick friend on a mat to Jesus. How desperate are we to get our friend to Jesus? How much are we willing to be inconvenienced?
4. Right praying starts with a clean heart. What difference might it make if we started every prayer with confession first, then prayed for what we want?

### ***ELIJAH WAS LIKE US***

Elijah was human, a follower of God who sometimes got depressed or had doubts. He snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory when he ran from Jezebel after decisively crushing the prophets of Baal. But James uses Elijah as an example of someone who did not allow his own weaknesses to undermine his trust in God. Elijah's weak belief in himself forced him to believe even more firmly in God. James is inviting us to identify with Elijah's weakness so that we might develop the same honesty and power in prayer that Elijah exercised. The same God who listened to and acted on Elijah's prayers will give attention to ours.