

JAMES 5:13-18  
Prayer and Faith

Court case: bar owner vs local church

Judge: "I'm not sure who is responsible for the fire, but I know this. The bar owner believes in the power of prayer, but the church leaders don't."

Prayer is such a broad topic, and it can be rather confusing.

This passage may cause more heartburn for believers than any other because many of you sitting here today would say, "IT DOESN'T WORK, or I'm just a miserable failure as a Christian. I'll leave prayer to others."

I know the feeling. There are things and people I've prayed for and have not seen the answer I was, or am, seeking. There are things that God has done that I would have called answers to prayer had I actually prayed about them.

13 Is anyone among you suffering? *Then he must pray.* Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you sick? *Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;* 15 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.

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. 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.

James takes the theme of patience and endurance into the area of suffering and prayer.

This is where it is so important to remember that James 5 is NOT the only passage in the Bible that deals with prayer. Last week I mentioned that the Bible is comfortable with us living in areas of tension. The principle is: PAY ATTENTION TO THE TENSION.

The biblical tension regarding prayer is this:

As dependent creatures, we are called to pray

Vs

As responsible moral agents, we are called to act.

We often live between the tensions of those two realities. Some of us may be more inclined to one over the other, and sadly we can become critical of the other group.

There is another area of tension:

"WHATEVER you ask in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13

Vs

"Whatever you ask IN MY NAME, I will do it."

God wants to encourage us to pray BIG BOLD prayers while we trust His BIG sovereign heart. He gives us access to the throne room but He always remains on the throne.

We are encouraged to pray at all times, honestly, without ceasing, with thanksgiving, with boldness, and without wavering or doubting.

We are also shown by the example of some giants of the faith that God's ways are not our ways and that "we don't always get what we want". The Bible taught us that long before the Rolling Stones did.

David prayed for the child of Bathsheba, but the child died.

The Apostle Paul prayed for the thorn in the flesh to be removed, but it did not happen.

Jesus prayed for the cup to pass from him, "if it be the Father's will"

David, Paul, and Jesus were three righteous men who knew how to pray, yet they also knew that prayer privilege wasn't a blank check. **For all the promises that we find in scripture, the overarching posture of faith is, "If it be Your will."**

Fervency and persistence are not the key factors in prayer. We certainly learn this from the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel as they were up against Elijah, the prophet of the one true God. It's not the fervency of prayer but the one to whom prayer is addressed that is crucial. 1 Kings 18

v. 13 suffering = as like the prophets because of the message they preached. Suffering hardship and affliction, not so much issues of health or the result of poor decisions.

**#1 pray- draw near to God in distress. Prayer is for all of God's people, especially when afflicted.** What else could we do that would be of benefit, grumble??

As James has told us to be active in our patience, so too we are to be active in our prayer. This is another way to "be patient" - pray. Prayer and patience go together. They feed off each other.

**Prayer in affliction helps ensure that our affliction won't be wasted.** This means that in times of affliction we can openly and honestly cry out to God from the depth of our pain and sorrow. The Psalms give many examples of this. They reflect the cries of the soul.

And **cheerfulness in good circumstances helps ensure that our success will be sanctified.** The surprise blessings and tender mercies of God are sanctified when we acknowledge that they come from the hand of a compassionate and merciful Father.

**When we are cheerful because of good circumstances, singing praises reminds us that God bestows blessings, even when we haven't prayed for them.** God just blesses His people in ways we haven't even thought of.

EX: audience at Oprah Winfrey show - "You get a car and you get a car"...God SAYS, ."You get a blessing, and you get a blessing." EVERY GOOD GIFT IS FROM ABOVE. Don't forget that.

Scripture speaks of moderation and self-control, but if there are two areas where it is ok to risk excess they are prayer in affliction and praise is times of cheerfulness.

Calvin puts the point beautifully: **"there is no time in which God does not invite us to himself." Or as another put it, by prayer, or conversation with God, we are to "hallow every pleasure and sanctify every pain."** [Motyer, 188]

**v. 14,15 - the Christian life is to be lived in community.**

NOTE\*\* this is NOT the only biblical passage on prayer. James in his letter speaks in broad general terms like the OT wisdom literature of Proverbs. He is citing general patterns, not specifics that always happen.

Apart from the ministry of the apostles there is no evidence of widespread work of healing in the early church. There is no biblical evidence that miracles were a regular occurrence in the life of the early church.

The use of oil was not some magic formula for healing, but a symbolic way of showing the invisible power and blessing of God. It is the prayer of faith, not the oil of faith.

\*\* Side Road – prayer cloths, holy oil, the Dalton Bible that was oozing oil, etc, these are not based on biblical teaching.

This section raises some big questions:

**How sick must one be before calling the elders?**

The indications here are that one would be rather sick, i.e. bed ridden with a prolonged illness, unable to get up, perhaps unable to pray for oneself (The Elders are called on to pray over, not with the person.)

**Must the prayer always be answered for healing?**

It was just 16 verses ago that James was warning about presumption in our hearts, so we should live with a posture of “If the Lord wills”. We dare not be presumptuous about what God’s sovereign will is in all situations. Nor should we be hesitant to fervently ask God to restore and raise up the one who is ill. Our days are numbered by God, not by us. I’m pretty sure that everyone that Jesus healed died at some later point.

In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” Jesus shows us that our greater concern should always be “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

**IS CONFESSION necessary because the illness was caused by sin?**

The Bible certainly doesn’t lead us to believe that sickness is always or even usually a punishment for sin, but it certainly teaches that it may be.

Or it may be, or may also be that, lying ill has given the person opportunity for reflection and self-examination and, as a result, he or she has become conscious of sins inadequately confessed and repented of. While being bedridden is not the easiest place to work out your theology, it may be the place where God gets your attention.

Let’s bring this home by pointing out that the Elders of Highlands are more than willing to go pray for those who call upon us to do so. We are more than willing to hear a confession and pray for spiritual and physical restoration.

While James is talking about those who are physically ill, there may be those who are spiritually ill or relationally ill who need to call the elders.

In some cases there may be marriages or relationships that are incapacitated and this sort of prayer with confession is needed. Don’t wait until a marriage is dead to call for prayer.

**v. 16 Confession and prayer are the generalized practices that grease the engine of the Christian life.**

There is no warrant in James for ongoing routine public confession of sins.

As we saw in the PeaceMakers SS class, issues of sin should be dealt with on a personal basis. If the sin is public, then there would need to be public confession, but if not, it doesn’t serve a real purpose for doing a public confessional striptease.

There is certainly warrant for confessing to the one we have offended. It may also be the case that we need to confess the sin of being easily offended.

EX: several varieties of CONFESSIONS – those who never confess sin to anyone, including God and those who turn it into a sort of humble bragging, virtue signaling or a spiritual sanitizing of one’s faults. Another deeply corrupted form is the sort of “struggle sessions” practiced in religious and political cults where people are put on the hot seat before a group to be accused or confess. The Jim Jones People’s Temple cult from the 1960’s-70’s was really big on this.

Sadly, we got a modern glimpse of it last summer when people gathered in public to make group confessions and repeat political mantras or people were confronted on the street or in outdoor restaurants where others tried to coerce some sort of woke confession from them.

Back in the traditional religious realm, this prayer and confession are abused when people call for prayer and they aren't healed. Too often, they are blamed because they didn't have enough faith or they are still hiding sin in their lives.

I have many disagreements with the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic church, but one thing they do that is commendable is the private confessional. Where it goes off track is in making it a sacrament of penance and saying it has to be done to a priest. James doesn't mention a priest or penance, i.e. the act of contrition to pay for the sin – “Two Hail Mary's and Three Our Father's”, etc.

v. 18 another verse of James citing another believer as an example. Elijah is one whose prayer was effective.

Was Elijah a man of righteous perfection in terms of faith? NO.

**James points out that ELIJAH was a man with a nature like ours.**

He had a great victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and then went into a spiritual funk where he asked God to end his life. (1 Kings 19:4). Even then, he was a man of honest prayer.

Elijah was like other giants of the faith in the OT – Abraham, Moses, David, and other prophets, etc. – they were far from perfect. Scripture records their failings for all to see. But they were also men who were willing to cry out to God in honest pain and despair.

**Prayer can't be effectual and righteous if it isn't honest.**

This passage is not intended to keep you from praying by thinking, “I'm not a perfect person or a faith giant like Elijah. We'll turn prayer over to the experts, the professionals.”

NO. James is seeking to ENCOURAGE us to pray by reminding us that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

**Powerful prayer doesn't require a super-hero type faith. It does require a supernatural God.** Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, who has a God like ours. That is the point – we have a great God and we can be bold in prayer before Him.

Powerful prayers are those that rely on a powerful God, who alone can do what is asked.

Do we make requests that can only be answered by a powerful God?

Are we praying for results that can only be explained by the Holy Spirit.?

Do we believe in the power of prayer as much as some secular thinkers do?

An article in The Independent newspaper in the UK gives voice to someone who calls for a ban on conversion therapy, defining conversion therapy as any belief that disagrees with any part of the LGBTQ agenda. The language of the article goes so far as to say that if you're going to have the society that the LGBTQ+ activists are demanding and many governments are now promising, then you're going to have to face the fact that you will have to criminalize “the pernicious power of prayer.” This would be in line with a law in the Australian state of Victoria that already has such a prayer ban. They may think prayer can be “pernicious”, but they also think it can be powerful. DO WE??

What some may call a “culture war” is rapidly revealing itself as a spiritual and religious war and the battle is coming to us, whether we like it or not. Perhaps you've heard the expression, “Politics is downstream from culture.” Well, culture is downstream from theology. It always has been ever since God gave Israel 10 basic laws for creating a culture of love for God and for one another. Those 10 Commandments were designed to promote human value and flourishing.

Perhaps we've understood that prayer itself is a spiritual battle, but now even the freedom to pray is being contested in some areas.

We are in need of those who will pray boldly in the face of such challenges. I'm not talking about making it rain or even raising people from the dead, but rather bringing spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead, or bringing forgiveness and restoration in relationships that seem hopelessly broken, or the wisdom, faith, and courage to stand for Christ, His church, and His kingdom values in the midst of a culture that is captured by the spirit of the age.

There is nothing you can ask that is too big for God, but you can ask for things that are bad for you but you don't know it yet.

EX: Garth Brooks – Thank God for Unanswered Prayers. – he saw an old high school sweetheart that he'd prayed to marry but it didn't work out. Given the wife that God gave him, he was thankful.

And just because He doesn't answer doesn't mean He don't care

Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

#### The Blessing of Unanswered Prayers,

I asked for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I had asked for, but everything that I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered; I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

Unknown Confederate soldier

#### THE TABLE

Who else had a nature like ours? JESUS. Yes, he was God, but he was also fully man.

He prayed fervently as well...]

Luke 22

41 And He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray, 42 saying, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done." 43 Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. 44 And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.

The Father's will was realized as Jesus gave himself for us, and He invites us to remember and commune with Him as we come to the Table.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/lgbt-conversion-therapy-ban-mental-health-b1805080.html>

<https://www.e-n.org.uk/2021/04/uk-news/ban-pernicious-prayer-call/?search=1>

<https://www.christian.org.uk/news/lgbt-activist-calls-for-uk-ban-on-prayer-for-unwanted-same-sex-attraction/>

<https://www.beliefnet.com/prayers/protestant/gratitude/the-blessing-of-unanswered-prayers.aspx>

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