



A Passion for Prayer

(James 5:10-18)

In my sermon last week I said that there were two areas I believed God wanted to challenge us this year. Both were areas in which God was challenging ALL of us. Sometimes we can feel that certain ministries are the preserve of those God has equipped, but we can all honour God by being a generous people as He is a generous God. I got a mixed reception back last week. One or two people said that teaching was overdue as I'd actually never preached on it before. There were others who didn't think it was appropriate that we should have a sermon on that subject. For my part, I preach what I believe is the clear message of the Word of God. If that is so, then the responsibility of how we respond to that word is between you and God not between you and me. Don't shoot the messenger – unless you thought that the messenger got it wrong, and that Scripture and therefore God says something else.

But the central importance of what I had to say last week and what I want to say this week is that God wants us to be inheritors of powerful promises. Last week it was about our generosity being such that God opens the floodgates of heaven in blessing. This week we'll see how God wants us to be people who experience His power through prayer.

I've got to admit at the outset that James 5 isn't a typical passage on prayer. Let's be honest, it's a difficult passage and I probably won't do it complete justice this morning. Sometimes it's easy to miss the message of passages like this because we become bogged down in the difficult bit. I believe God wants us to come to be people with dynamic prayer lives and the message of James 5 is actually very clear and unequivocal on the power of prayer and that's what I want to focus on this morning.

At the end of last year I did a series called Heart of Discipleship. We saw there how we are people of relationship. It is a relationship where we speak to God and He speaks to us. As disciples, we need to seek God's will for our lives, for the lives of others and for the Church. If we are people of relationship - children of the Living God, we need to spend time speaking to Him and letting Him speak to us in our own prayer lives and as we meditate on His written word. We can move forward in faith because we discern the voice of God in His written word and by His Spirit. We also saw that right at the heart of our faith is perseverance which is at the core of discipline: that's discipleship.

Most of all, as we have a relationship with God, we should run to Him when all the troubles and problems of life seem to come at us. But so often we don't share the things of life with our God and it isn't surprising is it that He seems far away when problems happen. To a certain extent, over the last six months we have already looked at many aspects of prayer because a true walk with God as one of His people means that we need to spend time in His presence, letting Him speak to us. If we walk with Him and follow Him, we speak to Him as we do so. My wife and I usually go for a long walk our days off. It isn't just so that we can go somewhere and see some nice scenery, but it is an opportunity to talk without the pressures of life and the pressures influencing us. It's a time spent together without the rest of the family in tow. The same is true of our walk with God; He wants us to spend time communing with Him.

God has given us prayer because He wants us to communicate with Him in all aspects of your lives as His people and this passage at the end of James is designed to encourage us to pray, particularly in the type of situation where we might not, and rely on the world to deal with our situation rather than the living God.

I've given you this piece of humour many times but I crave your indulgence one time more:

Sign on a church building: " Why pray? when you can worry and take tranquillizers"

True isn't it, prayer may well be the last thing we do in our lives. Why? Makes you think doesn't it? If God is who He is: all powerful, creator of the universe, the One who loves us, the One who is our Father, the one who cares intimately about us and desires to walk with us and by His Spirit is in us; then why isn't He the first thing that comes into our mind when the incidents of life meet us and we flap and worry and cry help? We are sick so we go to the Doctor, we have personal problems so we go to our husband, wife family or friends, we get into a mess and we ring around to ask for help. We have problems with people, so we get someone to sort them out - or worse - just sit at home and simmer in un-forgiveness! Why didn't we speak to God first? After all, He is the most available. He walks with us always, yet we spend so little time communing with Him.

We all accept the mental assent that we should don't we? We know he's there. We know He desires to be with us. Yet we never make the connection. We never ask. I guess the people that James wrote to had much the same problem. At least that hasn't changed in 2000 years. They faced persecution and sickness and James writes to them to say "Pray about it!". James reminds us of the promises of God and the power of prayer. Here are three pointers to help in this passage.

◆ Speak with Integrity

Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

I debated whether I should put this in about prayer at all. But in a sense it does. Earlier in the chapter James warns the Christians about grumbling against one another but wait patiently for the Lord. These were a people who by following Christ had found their lot in life was not easy. The temptation for those who were richer to just get on with life, in fact for all of them to say they have faith but get on with their own business. James is a letter about faith and works - if we have faith our lives should reflect that in who we are and what we do. But many of these people had double standards. Sounds familiar doesn't it. Hypocrisy; double standards. Say one thing; do another

Worse, what they did is still common in many societies today. They only did what they said they would if they swore it on an oath to God. When someone wants to make sure what they are saying is true they will say "I swear to God that is true...". In court we swear before God holding a Bible that the evidence we shall give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." Why? Because some people think that it doesn't matter if we speak untruth if we aren't under oath, making a promise or signing a contract. How many times have you made sure you get something in writing? Why? Because like then, you just can't trust people these days!

The thing about oaths is that they are a prayer before God. Why should we only speak with integrity to God but not to anyone else? Therefore **above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else**. In other words, swearing oaths is not the sort of prayer God wants to hear from us because it is an open statement of our hypocrisy because it implies we have to because we are otherwise untrustworthy! So saying an oath is actually how NOT to pray.

One thing a Christian should NEVER need to do is swear an oath. Our word should be our bond. How long was it since you last heard that phrase? **Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.** Tough words! Untruth - or to put it in context lying - should never be part of a Christian's life. God calls us to be open and truthful with one another as God's people and as people in this world. I don't know how many times I've repeated that from the front in the last months. We are called to be people of integrity. In an age where integrity is at a premium, people with it stand out from the crowd!

◆ Pray and Worship

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray . Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Here are two simple commands to a people who were persecuted and/or had difficulties in life. They are rather obvious really. Why don't we ever do the obvious? I'm sure James had that in his mind as He was inspired to write it. For the very fact we don't do what is obvious is the reason why it is written here. When you are in trouble; who is your first port of call? In future who will be? Jesus.

But there is more to this verse as we read. **Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.** Christians are likely to get around to praying if they are in trouble but do you praise God when things are going well. Maybe - or maybe not. It rather reminds me of the story of Joseph where Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cup-bearer and baker. If you remember, the cup-bearer was joyously

reprieved. Did he remember Joseph? No - not until some time later. Can you imagine the guilt he felt? He could have sung Joseph's praises ages before. But he was so tied up with his job or himself or whatever that he forgot him. How human and how true in our lives I think!

One of the things that most annoys parents is when their children are ungrateful. Can you remember how your parents always made you sand letters of thanks after Christmas? And as a parent having to remind them to say the "magic words" - thank you - as a mark of their appreciation of what was being done for them.

Do we praise God for what He has done? Or do we take it all for granted? Maybe we praise ourselves. Or worse, we are thankful for our "good luck". You are the people of God - luck doesn't come into it! Let's learn to praise Him, particularly when we are happy and joyful because in my experience, that's when people most forget the God who has brought them happiness. How transformed our worship would be and our spiritual lives would be if with Paul we could **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 5:19-20) or how more so if we could do this 16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thess 5:16-18).**

◆ Pray with One Another

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. 15 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. 16 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.

People think these words as very controversial. Why? I guess it is because this is not the practice in most churches. When something we find in scripture isn't in accordance with scripture, what do we do? Well, we can't say Scripture is wrong – definitely not. We usually can't bring ourselves to say we may be wrong. After all," we were taught by the Rev so and so, or Mr so and so. So Mark is probably wrong if he says anything else." As I said earlier, my aim is to discern what God is saying through His word, whether it suits me or not and that should be the aim of every believer. The only view that counts is God's.

Many Christians try to massage the verses - "The practice died out in the first century". Where does it say that in Scripture and actually it's been used almost continuously since the first century? "It only applied to the people James was writing to?" Where does it say that and why was the information disseminated to the rest of the world in that case? Martin Luther's solution was simple. He doubted whether the epistle of James was part of the inspired scriptures. Kop out Mart! Total kop out!

The truth is, these verses say what they say and they pretty well can't say anything else. Even more so when there are no verses that will either qualify or change them - they say what they say. We can either take them on board or we can be good Baptists and just ignore them. What? Ignore the word of God? Of course not. God has spoken and we must take on board what He teaches us through James.

We ask ourselves then - what do these verses teach? They couldn't be clearer.

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. 15 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.

What do you do when you are sick? Go to the doctor? Nothing wrong with going to the doctor as that may well facilitate your healing. But calling the elders of the church and ask for prayer? Not first in our list. That said, just because no-one has ever asked me in this church doesn't mean I don't or won't. This is scripture and if we agree this is what God says, then maybe it's time we started practising it. We don't have any problem with the rest of it - like pray for one another in verse 16, we do that, so what's wrong with verse 14? This is as much of a challenge to you as it is to me.

Let's go on. What is so special about being prayed for by the elders? In this case the Greek *presbuteros* is probably used in the context of the leaders of the church. As we will find out in the next verse, we can pray for one another for healing just as well. So why the elders?

➔ **They have spiritual maturity**

We know from 1 Timothy that leaders *per se* have no particular gift of healing so why go to them? James is going to say in verse 17 that as great as Elijah was, he was a man just like us. But the prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective. Why? Because a person of spiritual maturity (and that's what is suggested here) is someone who walks close to God and knows His mind. They pray prayers of faith. And what is faith? *Heb 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.* Faith is knowing where God's mind is. When it comes to the big things in life – like healing – and you can't discern the will of God; seek out those mature in the faith.

➔ **In anointing they recognise the Lordship of Christ**

But a visit to the elders in itself is only significant because the sick receive prayer and anointing. Oil is significant here. Anointing with oil was medicinal, and was commonly practised in those days. Now I'm not saying that we should use olive oil as a cure for everything. I'm not holding this up and saying "Come and buy Dr Mark's wonder medicine". However what anointing symbolically marks is God's favour on an individual and His authority over them. Samuel anointed Saul and David as kings. Anointing the sick with oil accepts the fact that Jesus has Lordship in our sickness and therefore over our healing. That's another great Bible study subject: anointing.

➔ **They have been given authority to shepherd the flock**

But look at the wording again: **Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church .** The significance of elders is that they are the leaders, the shepherds of the church as Paul calls them in Acts 20. Their role is the pastoral oversight of the church and part of that logically as a shepherd or "under-shepherd to the Great Shepherd" is to deal with the flock's welfare, and that includes ministering to those who are sick. Why do you think Ministers visit the sick? To give you a parallel with last week, the elders of Jewish synagogues prayed for the sick and anointed them with oil. So by the same account, Christian elders had the same role by what James says here.

What all this doesn't mean that you forget the doctors, forget treatment and pills. But realise that Jesus and prayer, particularly being prayed for by others is part of the healing process in your life. Actually, there is nothing to suggest that James is talking about miraculous healing here, just healing in general which may or may not include the miraculous. What he is saying is that in all sickness, recognise from the outset the authority that Christ has over the situation and over you and the role that prayer has in your healing. Never balk at people praying for you. In fact, don't just head for the elders now the idea that you can do that has been planted – pray for one another because it makes a difference. **The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**

15 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. 16 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.

Verse 16 sounds a bit drastic doesn't it. Firstly as you can see, James doesn't make a direct link between sin and sickness. Some may be but people become sick for a multitude of reasons. But the point of verse 16 is to recognise that sin in our lives need to be dealt with and we need others to pray and help us in that, not just in the area of sickness and healing which may not be connected anyway. Confess sins? We're not Catholics! We're certainly not. The idea James has here is that we don't just sit on our sins, but we ask others to pray for us that we are freed from sin that is tying us down. Why?

Prior to World War II in Nazi Germany, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer conducted an underground seminary in Pomerania. The teachers and 25 students shared a common life. His experience produced a spiritual classic, "Life Together," in which he documents the Biblical insights he gained. In the last chapter of the book he gives some reasons for the practice of mutual confession. Primary among them is the isolation that sin brings. Sin drives Christians apart. Says Bonhoeffer, "Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him." But confession to a fellow brother or sister destroys this deadly isolation. It pulls down the barrier of hypocrisy and allows the free flow of God's grace in the community. (David Holwick)

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. So we pray for one another. Don't get bogged down with all the healing bit here. James encouraging us as we grapple with the issues of

sin and/or sickness in our lives, that we pray for and minister to one another and not be afraid to ask; and to not even be afraid to ask the elders of the church. God wants us to have victory in prayer and that's achieved by praying for one another and that's the clear and unequivocal message of these verses. **The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**

◆ **Pray with Power & Authority**

16 The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 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. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

James has already made it clear that we should pray for one another and not just go to the elders when we need to pray. Elijah was a man just like us yet we read of power in his prayers. Why? Because **the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.** I've now repeated those words *ad nauseam*. It's what James 5 is about. Who is a righteous man here? James isn't referring to someone who is righteous by virtue of faith in Christ, but someone like Elijah whose walk was pleasing to God and who could be used by God to bring Him glory. And Elijah' s prayer was powerful as we've just read.

And James says **Elijah was a man just like us.** If Elijah could have prayer like that then so could we. We need to be righteous people. Our challenge in 2005 is to pray like Elijah and we do that by walking with God. Walking and talking with Him. Communing with Him. Desiring His presence. Desiring to follow Jesus as disciples. To be different from the crowd. To be people of integrity. How many times did that crop up last year. To be people of integrity. **Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no.**

But it goes deeper. We are to be people who pray. Prayer is our first port of call whether we have problems or things are going well. We pray for one another because when we are weak others are strong. We know if we walk with God: live as righteous people then our prayer can be powerful and effective.

God wants us to be Elijahs in 2005. Ordinary people who through prayer do extraordinary things. We are told these things not to be inadequate, but to be Elijahs here in Swaffham. To be people who pray and see the power of God at work. And as people see it, we will see people challenged and changed here in Swaffham. This is a new era, let's grasp Gods word and God's promises.



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