

Praying for the Wandering - James 5:13-20

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[0 : 00] Read God's Word, James 5, starting at verse 13. Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.

Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops.

[1 : 20] My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

I'm going to pray and then we're going to look at God's word. And before we do, I just want to make just a brief comment about this text. We've been looking through James.

This is the last one in the series. This is probably the hardest part of James. It's one of the hardest parts in the New Testament and it's one of the hardest parts in the whole Bible.

It's a difficult passage. And as we go through this, you may be thinking, I've got a question here. I'm not quite sure about that. So please, please do talk to me afterwards.

Come back if you've got any questions or if something wasn't clear, please come and ask as to what it's all about. Having said it's difficult, we can ask for the Holy Spirit to help us to bring light to his word and to our lives.

[2 : 37] So let's pray for his help right now. Father, we ask for the help of your Holy Spirit to understand your word.

where there is confusion, you would bring clarity. And we pray, Father, that we would learn much this morning and be encouraged and built up.

And I pray that there will be nothing that I say that would bring any kind of distress to any person here, but rather that your word and the words that I speak would only lead to building up and to great encouragement.

Father, please be at work. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So what do you think is the best thing you could do for someone in the church family?

What do you think would be one of the most helpful things you could do? You might think, in practical ways, that I could maybe make a meal for somebody. I could go visit them. If they've got children, I could look after them.

[4 : 02] What would you think you could do that would help someone in your church family? Well, James tells us here the answer to that question. Look at verse 19.

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wonder from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

As members of God's family, we're called to watch out for our brothers and sisters. We're to turn each other from wandering away from God and to turn each other back to the Lord Jesus.

That is the best thing we could do for one another. And how are we going to do that? Well, James gives us the answer through this text.

Pray. Always pray. Look at verse 13. Is any one of you in trouble? Is anybody here suffering?

[5 : 22] Are you going through trials? Are you going through struggles? Well, you know what? Pray. Pray for each other. Is anyone here happy? Is life going well for you?

Are you content? Well, pray for them. Offer songs of praise. Thanksgiving to God. You see, God wants His people to pray.

And the Father delights when we cry out to Him in prayer. And one of the best prayers that we can pray for each other is to pray that those who are turning and wandering away from Christ will turn back to Christ and be forgiven and be restored.

Prayers that turn people who are walking away from Christ and turn them back to Christ so they can be forgiven and restored.

So two big prayers that we are encouraged to pray for one another. Here's the first one. Pray for healing.

[6 : 35] Pray for healing. Look at verse 15. It tells us there that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well, the Lord will raise them up.

And then in verse 16 we get something similar. It tells us in the middle of 16, Pray for each other so that you may be healed.

So we're to pray for each other's healing. But this healing is much more than just physical healing. Look at verse 14.

Is anyone among you ill? Is anybody sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil.

So this anointing with oil was symbolic. It was a way of kind of setting the person apart, saying we're going to pray for this person and commit them to the Lord. So anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

[7 : 38] Now before we get into the detail of that, let me just say two things about what it's not saying. Okay? It's not saying that elders have special healing powers.

As with any healing, look at verse 15. It tells us that the prayer is offered in faith.

So it's not the elders demanding, but the elders entrusting to God's good and perfect will. We offer the prayer in faith.

And as verse 15 also tells us, it is the Lord who will raise them up. It's not the elders, but it is the Lord through prayer that will raise them up.

So the elders don't have any special healing powers. That's the first thing it's not saying. The other thing that it's not saying is that if you stub your big toe or if you suffer a little bit of man flu, that you're to call the elders.

[8 : 46] It's not saying that. Elders are not a replacement for South Dock. Yes, we should pray if we're sick and yes, we should pray if we're not feeling well, but it doesn't mean to say we call the elders for every little illness that we might have.

It seems to be in this context that the illness is serious and is related to turning away from God.

So look again at the beginning of verse 14. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders. Well, why call the elders if somebody is sick? Well, the elders of the church are shepherds who care for the sheep, God's people.

They've been given spiritual oversight of the church. They're to ensure that each and every one of us are walking in the truth and not wandering away.

[9 : 49] And where people think illness is related to their wandering away from Christ, they're to call the elders.

Let me try and expand this a bit more. Remember some of the issues that James has been addressing in the church. Back in chapter 1, we saw that some of the people in the church were overlooking the most vulnerable people, the widows and the orphans, and they've left them in terrible distress.

Others have been discriminating, favouring the wealthy over the poor. They were tearing each other apart by their own words, slandering one another.

Fights and quarrels were existing within the church and perhaps worst of all, we saw this at the beginning of chapter 5, some were hoarding their wealth and were oppressing the weak and it seems that some of them even died because of the injustice and oppression.

Terrible things were happening in the church. They were wandering away from the truth. So it seems that the sickness that is present is related to their wandering away from Christ.

[11:13] And the way to see them healed and restored is to pray, verse 15. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well, the Lord will raise them up.

If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Now, at one level that seems straightforward, but maybe we're sitting here this morning and thinking, well, I'm not feeling so well today. I'm feeling a bit sick. I wonder if that's related to some particular sin that I might have committed. Do I need to call the elders?

Well, let me give you two answers to that. First, you can read it there on the screen. In John's Gospel, chapter 9, verses 1 to 3, it tells us here that Jesus, as he went along, he saw a blind man from birth.

His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Oh, sorry.

[12:29] I've got it on the screen. There we go. Let me read it again. Okay? So, Jesus, as he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

So, they're thinking that the reason he's blind is because of some sin somewhere. Look at Jesus' reply. Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus.

But this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in him. So, Jesus wants us to be absolutely clear that if we have some illness or sickness, it doesn't always mean that it's the result of some particular sin.

We need to be very, very careful about people who claim that you're sick because of some sin in your life. Some of the programs that you'll watch on the God channel will tell you that.

we need to stay clear of false teaching which says if you're sick, it's because of some sin in your life.

[13:41] The second answer that we want to give to the question of sin and sickness, it comes in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. So, in this context, Paul here is writing about the Lord's Supper and he's really upset, he's annoyed about what's happening when they share in the Lord's Supper.

So, look at 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 20. So then, when you come together, it's not the Lord's Supper you eat.

For when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. So, it's like they all gather together in somebody's house, the wealthy are all eating and they're leaving those who don't have much outside, and they're eating their food.

As a result, one person remains hungry and another one gets drunk. So, instead of celebrating the Lord's Supper, they're getting drunk on the wine. Things are in chaos and disorder.

And Paul responds to them in verse 13. He says, that is why many among you are weak and ill and a number of you have fallen asleep.

[15:02] So, in this context, Paul is making a direct connection between their sickness and sin. he says, because you have been unrepentant, because you haven't turned back to God, some of the people in the church had even died.

That's what it means when it said they'd fallen asleep. It hadn't mean they fell asleep in the service. They had actually died. You see, God takes sin seriously and sometimes God in love will discipline his people so that they turn back to God.

So, go with me back to James where we were, James chapter 5. So, how are we to understand this sin and sickness issue that we're looking at here?

Well, look at the text carefully. Chapter 5, end of verse 15. It says, if they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

it does not mean their sickness is a result of sin, but, James is saying, it could be related. So, here's how I think this all works out in practice, verses 14 and 15.

[16:19] Let me give you a little scenario. I don't think there's anybody called Bob here. I've tried to think of a name that nobody has called Bob. There's no Bobs, so we're not thinking of anyone in particular.

So, let's suppose the elders get a call from Bob. Bob. Now, Bob could be a member of the congregation. Bob could even be one of the elders. And he rings up to say, he's sick.

He's not well. And Bob also knows that, well, he's been wandering away from Christ. And he's been ignoring blatant sin in his life.

And in response, the elders go to pray for his healing. And as they pray, opportunity is given for confession, for repentance to the Lord for any sin.

If the sickness is a result of some sin, they will be healed and forgiven. You see, sin is serious.

[17:18] God can't ignore it, especially among his people, the church. And while it's not our place to judge and condemn and say, well, the reason this person is sick is because of what they said or what they did, sometimes God in his kindness and in his goodness may cause somebody to be laid aside so that they can examine their own hearts and turn back to him in repentance.

The writer to the Hebrews put it like this, you can follow it on the screen. God disciplines us for our good in order that we might share in his holiness.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Now, let me please underline that not all sickness is related to sin. I want us to be clear, I want us all to hear that. So if you're here today and you're not feeling well and you're living in right relationship with the Lord, don't be thinking, God is doing something to me.

But sometimes, in a serious matter, sickness can be part of God's discipline. We need to take sin seriously.

[18:48] We need to repent. and of avail of God's wonderful forgiveness of healing and restoration. So, sin and sickness, repentance and healing.

Look at verse 16. So in the light of all of this, verse 16, therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

God and his wonderful plan and goodness has given to us each other and through our prayers for one another we can care for each other spiritually.

You see, the church is not a place where we hide our sin and where we come together and we pretend how good we are. No, the church is to be a safe and secure family where we can confess our sin and ask others to pray for us.

That's what verse 16 is saying, therefore, as you come together, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

[19:59] Instead of condemning and judging and pointing fingers, we point one another back to the Lord Jesus who forgives all our sins, restores us and renews us because in Christ we find a fresh start and a new beginning.

The sign of a healthy and a mature church is when I or you can go to another person and seek help. We can go to them and say, look, you know what, I've been really bitter and angry over these last number of days.

We can share with people our struggles with addiction. Perhaps we've been watching porn and we know we shouldn't. We need somebody to help us. We need to be honest about covering over issues where we've been lying or there's been deception.

Or maybe it's going to someone and facing up and saying, you know what, I haven't been loving my wife the way I should have been. Will you pray for me? Will you help me?

We can confess and receive the prayers and support of our brothers and sisters. The church family is not to be a place of condemnation, but a family of restoration, of building one another up.

[21:22] And as we do this, we bring healing to our hearts, healing to our relationships with one another, healing where it applies to our bodies, and healing ultimately in our relationship with God.

Through prayer, as we pray for one another, we turn each other back towards Christ. So, the first big prayer we are to pray, pray for healing.

The second big prayer to pray for each other is to pray for restoration. Look at verse 17. Elijah was a human being, even as we are.

He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it didn't rain on the land for three and a half years.

Again, he prayed and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Now, I don't think James is going and talking about healing and saying, look how wonderful prayer is here, and you know what? With your prayers, you can control the weather. you're off to the beach tomorrow.

[22:36] Stop raining now. Or maybe you want a bit of rain for your flowers. Start raining now. I don't think that's why he's talking about Elijah here, as we'll see.

The example of God, of introducing us to Elijah as a man who prayed about rain, is because Elijah was used by God to turn people who were wandering away from God, back to God, through prayer.

You see, verses 17 and 18 relate to one of the most incredible accounts in the Old Testament. So I'd like us to go back and look at that, if you keep your finger in James 5 and go back to 1 Kings. I hope some of you managed to read chapter 18. I sent a note out about that in the week. I hope you're able to read it. If you did, you'll be blessed because it will help you now.

So we'll go back to 1 Kings 17 and I haven't got a page number so if someone could help me out again. 3-5-9 3-5-9 to 1 Kings chapter 17.

[23 : 56] So as you're looking that up, let me set the scene here. The king at the time over God's people Israel was the evil Ahab. He was worse, the worst king that had ever been.

His wife was the notorious Jezebel. What she did in her past time was to round up all of God's prophets, kill them and then replace them with false prophets.

They had no time for God's words. And as a result, God's people were on this downward spiral, drifting further and further away from God.

They've been committing spiritual adultery. They've been turning from the one true God to other gods and living as they pleased. And it's into this context that Elijah arrives and now speaks and now prays.

So chapter 17, verse 1. Now Elijah, the Tishbite from Tishbi in Gilead, said to Ahab, remember he's the evil king, the one who's ruling over God's people.

[25 : 02] As the Lord of God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.

No rain. Why? Well, God is disciplining his people. Sin is serious and it can't be overlooked.

God's God's desire that they would return to him, be restored and be forgiven or something much worse could happen.

Well, after that prayer, about three years later, the people still haven't turned back to God and Elijah calls all the people of Israel together and Ahab and all the false prophets and he gathers them together at a place called Mount Carmel.

Look at chapter 18 verse 21. Chapter 18 verse 21. Elijah went before the people and said, how long will you waver between two opinions?

[26 : 12] If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, one of the false gods is God, follow him.

Decision time.

You've been drifting and doing your own things. Who are you going to follow? Well, after calling all the people together, Elijah gets the false prophets.

You might know the account where all the false prophets come together there to build an altar and they kill a bull and they put the bull on top. Elijah does exactly the same.

He builds his altar, he slaughters a bull and he puts it on top and then he challenges them to pray.

Verse 24, Then you call on the name of your God and I will call on the name of the Lord.

The God who answers by fire, he is God. Then all the people said, what you say is good. Right? So they're all going to pray, whoever answers with fire upon the altar, well that's going to be the one true God.

[27 : 22] So the false prophets get to pray, they pray, they pray, they pray, and nothing happens. They shout louder, they start cutting themselves, but nothing happens. Their so-called gods are powerless.

They offer them absolutely nothing, because wandering away from God leaves us empty and unfulfilled. Now it's Elijah's turn.

To make a point, he gets a whole load of water and he pours it all over his altar, he digs a trench around it and he pours more water on it, so everything is absolutely sodden.

And then Elijah prays, but look carefully at what he prays, chapter 18 verse 37, chapter 18 verse 37, So here's Elijah praying for the people who have been turning against God.

Here's what he prays, Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.

[28 : 40] Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, The Lord, he is God.

The Lord, he is God. You see, God's desire all through this is that his people would stop wandering and turn back to God.

But did you notice how they turned back? Look at verse 37, look at the prayer. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.

God turns the hearts of the people back to God as Elijah prays. And at the end of the account, Elijah prays again, the rains fall after three and a half years as a sign of God's forgiveness, blessing and restoration.

Now go back with me, please, to James chapter 5. Back to James. A big detour, but I think it's helpful for us to understand what's behind Elijah's prayer.

[30 : 03] Now you might remember how James confronted the church that he writes to. In chapter 4, verse 4, look at how James refers to the people.

James chapter 4, verse 4. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?

He's saying to them, will you stop committing adultery? Stop committing spiritual adultery. Stop turning away from God to other lovers. It happened at the time of Elijah, it's happening to the people here that James is writing to, and it can happen to you and to me.

It's a warning. Don't drift away from the Lord. But here's the good news for us. On another mountain, not Mount Carmel, but on the mountain of crucifixion, the ultimate sacrifice took place.

Where Jesus Christ laid down his life on the altar of the cross. Where he took my sin and your sin, and the fire of God's judgment did come down from heaven, and it fell on Christ.

[31 : 26] And now God calls all the people of the world to say, look at this mountain, look at Jesus, look at my son on the altar of the cross, who makes it possible for wanderers like you and me to be restored and be forgiven.

Just flick a couple of pages forward to 1st Peter chapter 2. After James comes Peter, 1st Peter chapter 2 verse 24.

I think this helpfully summarizes what we're getting at here. 1st Peter chapter 2 verse 24. He, talking of Jesus, himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

You see, we are to watch out for each other, point each other back to the cross, and pray for one another's restoration. So two big prayers we can pray for each other.

[32 : 48] Pray for healing, pray for restoration, and pray because prayer is powerful and effective.

Look at what it says in James chapter 5, the end of verse 15. James chapter 5, the end of verse 15. Sorry, the end of verse 16.

James 5, verse 16. It says, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are.

You see, Elijah was a righteous man, and his prayers were powerful and effective. They changed people. Well, you say, well, that's because Elijah was a prophet.

He was God's specially chosen person. He's different to you and I. But look what it says in verse 17. Elijah was a human being even as we are.

[33 : 59] He was full of flaws and failures, but yet God used him to turn people back to God as he prayed. That means God can use us like he used Elijah.

We can pray the same kind of prayer that Elijah prayed. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so that these people will know that you Lord are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.

Now I don't understand how prayer works. Prayer can be confusing, but this is something we can be absolutely sure of, that God works when we pray.

As we pray these kind of prayers, God works in the hearts of those who wandered away, causing them to turn in repentance back to God.

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective and the prayers that we pray for our church family are powerful and effective.

[35 : 11] God has placed us into a church family to care for one another, to support one another, and so we must watch out for each other.

Verse 19, my brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

How do you respond if you realize that somebody is missing for a few weeks, you haven't seen them for a while? Do you just ignore it and think oh, whatever.

We should give them a ring. Find out, make sure they are okay and if they are wandering to encourage them and help them back to Christ.

Do you ever ring to find out how somebody is doing? Maybe you notice sinful patterns and behaviors in your own life, in my life. Would you come to me and say, Johnny, I didn't like the way you've been talking, I don't like the way you've been behaving.

[36 : 36] you need to recognize that you need to turn back to God. You see, God has placed us in his family to restore one another and there is no sin that is so great that God's grace cannot deal with.

I need you and you need me. Together we need one another and the best thing we can do for each other is to pray. Pray that we will turn from our sin, turn from our wandering away from him and turn back to Christ in repentance.

Prayer is powerful and effective. Through prayer we are healed and restored.

Let's now just take a time to pray. I'm going to leave just a quiet time just for you to bring your own personal requests to the Lord.

But here's how I would like us to pray. Maybe you know somebody today, somebody in your own family, maybe a friend, maybe somebody from this church, someone who you know is wandering away, who has turned away from God.

[38 : 07] Pray for that person now. Pray that God would work in their life and turn that family member, that friend, that person to repentance so that they can know full healing and full restoration.

restoration. Let's just do that now in the quietness. Let's just do that now in the quietness. Welcome to the stop.

Thank you. Thank you.

Father, you know those who we care for and love, and we know that you long that each and every one of us would walk closely with you. We pray that you would hear our prayer, that you would answer, and by your grace you would cause your wandering people to turn back to you.

We pray, Father, that we ourselves, that you would forgive us of our sin. Forgive us where we have not walked with you as we should.

[40 : 02] Father, restore us. Make us strong. By your grace, enable us that we would keep walking with you, we pray.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. We're going to sing together. Father, come thou fount of every blessing.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.